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**December 13-15, 2025**

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## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Monday Gathering: No. 1 picks, the heart of the rebuild, are a mixed bag

By Aaron Portzline – December 15, 2025

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

### **Item No. 1: Rating the No. 1s**

Rebuilds are no sure things in the NHL. The only near-certainty is that the GM who starts the rebuild won't be around to enjoy the fruits of his suffering.

Not only does a franchise have to bottom out at the right time and get some NHL lottery luck — did the San Jose Sharks strike gold with Macklin Celebrini or what? — they have to nail their first-round picks, develop them correctly, build around them, etc.

There are so many aspects of the Blue Jackets that could be dissected right now, and nobody should be spared. A five-game losing streak has landed them in last place in the Metro Division and 15th out of 16 teams in the Eastern Conference. But it is striking to look at all those first-round picks they accumulated beginning in 2021 and how those players are currently making their presence felt with the Blue Jackets.

Ideally, those six players — five of them drafted among the top 12 — should be driving play for Columbus. But with one exception, that's not happening.

It's likely to come into focus this week when the Blue Jackets host the Anaheim Ducks on Tuesday in Nationwide Arena. The Ducks, on a similar rebuild timeline as the Jackets, are one of the best stories in the NHL this season, challenging Vegas for first place in the Pacific Division and leaning hard on recent first-round picks Leo Carlsson (17-23-40, plus-11), Beckett Sennecke (10-16-26, plus-4) and Mason McTavish (7-13-20, plus-1), among others.

When you look at how the Blue Jackets' blue chips are producing, it makes sense why the Jackets aren't exactly thriving this season. Yes, of course, the veterans aren't blameless. But these are the players who represent the picks that justified the losing.

2021

**No. 5 Kent Johnson:** This makes zero sense. Johnson played a big role in breathing some skill into the top six last season (24-33-57 in 68 games), but he's been missing in action so far this season with only 3-5-8 in 31 games. The 23-year-old played on the fourth line in Saturday's 3-2 loss to Vegas, which tells you how bad this is going.

Johnson can be one of the NHL's most electrifying players, but it's really hard to understand how this is going so poorly. Or, frankly, where this relationship might be headed.

**No. 12 Cole Sillinger:** In his fifth NHL season, Sillinger has defined himself as a third-line player, one who is good for 12-15 goals and 30-plus points a season. He's also a glue guy and popular in the dressing room, which is why teammates love him.

Having said that, you're left wanting more from a No. 12 overall pick.

**No. 25 Corson Ceulemans:** The way Ceulemans started last season before a rib injury, and the way he returned this season, has given many in the organization confidence that Ceulemans is on track to play in the NHL, possibly soon. But the reality is he hasn't played in the NHL yet and is no longer viewed as a top prospect.

2022

**No. 6 David Jiricek:** Remarkably, Jiricek's skating seemed to get worse during his three-plus seasons in the Columbus organization, and GM Don Waddell traded him early last season when he got a trade offer that included a first-round pick.

Jiricek is currently playing for AHL Iowa in the Minnesota Wild system.

**No. 12 Denton Mateychuk:** Since he debuted in the NHL about this time last season, Mateychuk has held down a top-four job with the Blue Jackets. That's a commentary on both his composure and the Jackets' blue-line situation.

Mateychuk is a keeper. He's not a straight-line showstopper with his speed, but his maneuverability in tight spaces and turns is impressive.

2023

**No. 3 Adam Fantilli:** The Blue Jackets were delighted Fantilli fell to them at No. 3, although it's clear Chicago (Connor Bedard) and Anaheim (Carlsson) did well with the first two picks. Fantilli is a two-way demon who is just learning how he can maximize his impact on games.

If there's one complaint, it's for Evason: Fantilli wasn't on the power play at the start of the season, and he's not always out quickly in OT. Ridiculous. Play him. Heck, overplay him.

2024

**No. 4 Cayden Lindstrom:** This is not going well, folks. Lindstrom missed almost all of last year following back surgery, and his rookie season at Michigan State has been a struggle. In 11 games, he has 1-2-3 and 22 penalty minutes.

Unless something changes drastically, it's hard to imagine him stepping into the NHL next season. Frankly, there should be a lot of concern here, with the injury history, the struggle to adapt and so on.

## **Item No. 2: Two trades**

The NHL was rocked by two big trades on Friday.

First came a trade between Edmonton and Pittsburgh, with the Penguins trading goalie Tristan Jarry and forward Samuel Poulin to Edmonton for goalie Stuart Skinner, defenseman Brett Kulak and a second-round pick in 2029.

Just a few hours later, that trade was pushed off the front page when the Vancouver Canucks traded all-world defenseman Quinn Hughes to the Minnesota Wild for forwards Marco Rossi and Liam Ohgren, defenseman Zeev Buium and a first-round pick next summer.

Blue Jackets fans were probably wondering if Waddell could — or should — have been involved in those talks, given how beneficial it could be to shake up the dressing room right now.

Let's deal first with the Hughes trade. The asking price, if you look at the Blue Jackets' roster and apply what Minnesota paid, would have been Fantilli, Mateychuk and a first-round draft pick. That's a steep price to pay for Hughes, especially since he isn't currently signed beyond the 2026-27 season.

As for the goaltender trade, if the Oilers were ever interested in Merzlikins — which seems unlikely — it probably faded sharply over the last month of the season when Merzlikins returned to the struggles he's dealt with over the past three or four seasons. There's no trade market for Merzlikins. If the Blue Jackets want to make a change, they'd likely have to put Merzlikins on waivers and send him to AHL Cleveland. In that scenario, Ivan Fedotov would come up from Cleveland to be Jet Greaves' backup.

### **Item No. 3: 'Z' in Italy**

It's widely expected that Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski will get the call officially inviting him to play for Team USA at the Olympics in Milan this coming February.

Werenski has become a major player for the Americans, especially with his performance last winter at the Four Nations Face-Off. Like many in the hockey world, he's paying attention to what's going on in Milan ahead of the Games as they race to get the arena finished in time. The men's hockey tournament runs Feb. 11-22, so it's going to be a close call.

"I'm sure they'll figure it out," Werenski said. "Hopefully, it'll be ready. Somebody said it's Feb. 2 now (for an official opening). That's cutting it close. That's the biggest issue for me, I feel like, going into a building that's really never been used before. There's a lot of stuff they'll have to work out there.

"It's out of our control as players. I'm hoping I'll get to go over there to experience it. I guess we'll find out in the next couple of weeks, so cross that bridge when we come to it."

It was revealed earlier this month that the ice sheet, expected to be NHL-size, is actually three feet shorter than the typical 200 x 85. Those three feet will be taken out of the neutral zone so neither of the attack zones will be affected.

"You'll notice it, maybe a little bit, getting to the red line," Werenski said. "Getting to the red line might be harder. But in terms of the actual game, I don't think it means much, to be honest. I don't think, as players, we'll really notice, and I don't think fans will, either."

### **Item No. 4: Snacks**

- Tough guy / right winger Mathieu Olivier has been out of the lineup since suffering an upper-body injury on Nov. 24 in Washington, but he joined a few other players for an optional morning skate on Saturday. He'd skated once on his own previously, and is now in queue to build his way back into the lineup. The next step will be joining the group for a full practice, then taking full contact before he's cleared to return. There's no timetable yet, the club has said, but it's moving in the right direction.

"We're just trying to go through the stages here and make sure that when I do come back it's 100 percent, and that I'm not thinking twice about what I do out there and I can play the way I play," Olivier said.

- Olivier was asked to set the scene as he was watching the Blue Jackets and New Jersey during their fight-filled game on Dec. 1.

"I'm watching the game in my basement and my kids are sleeping on the second floor," Olivier said. "My wife came down (to the basement) to tell me to calm down. So, that's pretty much all I can say, really. The guys did a really good job standing up for themselves."

- The Blue Jackets' goal differential by period: first period, +1; second period, +2; third period, minus-19. That third-period figure is the worst in the NHL.

- Werenski will play his 600th NHL game on Tuesday when the Jackets host Anaheim, becoming the fourth player in franchise history — after Boone Jenner (759 and counting), Rick Nash (674) and Cam Atkinson (627) — to reach that milestone. Last Thursday, Werenski passed David Savard (597) for most games played by a Columbus defenseman. On Tuesday, he'll break a deadlock in games played with former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno (599), now playing in Chicago.

That said, he's not a big milestone guy. Asked what these "games-played" marks mean, Werenski verbally shrugged: "I love playing here and I feel fortunate to be here for a long time. I just want to keep playing, adding to it. I'm good friends with Savvy and I'm a big fan of his game ... but I didn't even know that was coming up, so I guess that tells you how much I really don't care about it."

- As part of their 25th anniversary celebration, the Blue Jackets celebrated a third batch of former players on Saturday, including Tyler Wright, Jody Shelley, David Savard and Chris Clark. Wright, an original Blue Jacket, was this franchise's first fan favorite, not just for the way he played — he was undersized and over-motivated — but for his tireless charitable work off the ice, helping to start the franchise's Hats For Heroes program, which raises funds for cancer research.

- Here's Wright on his time in Columbus: "I've been retired now for almost 20 years. You have a lot of time to reflect on where you played, the cities you played in, and how you spent your career. I recognized that it was a unique situation for me, coming from Pittsburgh, where I had to play a specific role to stay in the lineup. This city and these fans in the original days, they appreciated hard work and tenacity. I mean, I bit off more than I could chew a lot of times. But I relished my time here. For me, when I think of myself as a player, I think of myself as a Blue Jacket."

- In 2002-03, the Blue Jackets had a wild game against the New York Rangers that ended in a three-on-three line brawl that forced Wright to fight with noted NHL tough guy Sandy McCarthy. Wright did his best to hold off McCarthy until the linesman could arrive, but that wasn't the end of the mayhem. "It's on YouTube, so my kids play it for me all the time," Wright said. "I was cut from both eyelids. I was getting escorted off the ice (by the linesmen) and there was a Rangers helmet at center ice and I tried to kick it, and I fell. So, you just got beat up in front of 20,000, you're bleeding from both eyes, now you fall .... my wife is waiting for me (after the game), and she says, 'That is the funniest thing I have ever seen.' So, yeah, that's very much alive in our household."

- Wright on his trade from Columbus to Anaheim on Nov. 15, 2005: "Crushed. It was crushing for me. I never really fit in Anaheim, I really didn't. It tore my heart out. You're in this game and anything can happen, obviously. It was the first time I'd been moved mid-season. I was pretty crushed internally, and I didn't last long. I think I retired the next year."

- Blue Jackets Monday Gathering trivia question: Wright had the third hat trick in the history of the Blue Jackets when he scored at even strength, on the power play, and on the penalty kill in a 3-0 win in Atlanta on March 16, 2001. At that point in the franchise's arc, it may have been the greatest single

performance in a game by a Columbus player. Your question: which players had the first and second hat tricks in franchise history?

- You know Fedotov is watching the Blue Jackets closely from Cleveland. On Saturday, he stopped 21 of 22 shots in a 4-1 win in Belleville, improving to 6-6-3 with a .901 save percentage.
- The Blue Jackets had internal discussions about changing the start time of the New Year's Eve game vs. the New Jersey Devils, but it will remain a 7 p.m. start in Nationwide Arena. Why consider changing? Because it overlaps with the Cotton Bowl, where Ohio State will face either Miami or Texas A&M at 7:30 p.m. Why not make it a matinee? Well, the Devils play in Toronto at 7 p.m. on Dec. 30. The NHL has a 22-hour rule, precluding clubs from starting a game within 22 hours of their previous game. That means the earliest the Blue Jackets could schedule the game, assuming New Jersey agreed, would have been 5 p.m.
- The first hat trick was by Geoff Sanderson against the Nashville Predators on Feb. 10, 2001 in a 3-2 win. The second was by Deron Quint on March 9, 2001 against the Florida Panthers in a 7-6 win.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' losing streak hits season-long 5 games as late rally attempt fizzles

**By Aaron Portzline – December 13, 2025**

It had all the trappings of a storybook finish.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli, who rushed off the ice late in the third period with blood dripping from his face, suddenly reappeared — all stitched up and cleaned up — on the bench with only 90 seconds left, begging to get back on the ice to join the hunt for the tying goal.

But there are no fairy tales this season in Columbus. Not yet, anyway.

The Blue Jackets, despite having a power play for the final 2:59 of regulation, and despite having a six-on-four advantage with goaltender Jet Greaves pulled for an extra skater, lost to the Vegas Golden Knights 3-2 before 16,965 in Nationwide Arena.

Yegor Chinakhov, who scored earlier in the game, rang a puck off the post early in the power play that could have tied it. Otherwise, the Blue Jackets couldn't solve Vegas goaltender Carter Hart, who had 27 saves.

"Yeah, 100 percent," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said, when asked if he felt the Blue Jackets were going to tie the score and force overtime. "We were talking on the bench about when we were going to pull Jet if we didn't score (early in the power play).

"Everything sets up, you know. It's been a great game. Both teams are playing freaking hard. It'd be nice to get that to overtime or a shootout or whatever, but ... we hit the post, we have a couple of opportunities that at the end. It just didn't go in the net for us."

Charlie Coyle also scored for the Blue Jackets, while Greaves finished with 22 saves. It marked the Blue Jackets' fifth consecutive loss and their fourth straight defeat in regulation, both season highs.

The Blue Jackets haven't been winning enough, but they've been keeping themselves within sniffing distance of the pack in the Eastern Conference by forcing games beyond regulation and gaining, at minimum, loser's points.

But regulation losses ... those are the crushers. And, while the two points Saturday went to a Western Conference opponent, the Blue Jackets are going to quickly slide into dangerous territory if they don't start learning how to win games.

The Blue Jackets had a tough day at the rink Friday. Team meetings don't happen when things are going well, right?

Evason, who has rarely shared a public critique of his players, said he didn't believe they were committed enough defensively in Thursday's less-than-inspirational 6-3 loss to the Ottawa Senators.

That's the type of comment that usually sparks a response from players. And if it doesn't ... you've got problems.

“They’re a good team; we’re a good team,” Evason said. “It’s hard to continually say we didn’t catch a break, or whatever, but we worked tonight. The other night, we didn’t like our commitment. Tonight, we did the right things.”

Coyle scored off the rush 7:02 into the game for a 1-0 Columbus lead. After a long stretch with the score tied 1-1, Chinakhov ended a 19-game stretch without a point by scoring his third goal of the season.

Chinakhov’s wrister, at 4:49 of the third period, beat Hart to the far-side post (clang!), rattled off the near-side post (clang!) and settled into the net. It was an impressive shot, and a reminder of how maddening and senseless it is that he’s found a spot, typically, on the Blue Jackets’ fourth line.

But only 1:03 after Chinakhov’s goal, the Golden Knights tied it at 2-2. And at 13:13, Brayden McNabb scored a tough-angle shot — his skates were on the goal line extending outside the net — to make it 3-2 Vegas.

“Yes, it’s a really good shot by him, but at the end of the day, I have to make that save for us, especially at that time of the game,” Greaves said. “I saw it. Too good a spot on that, but I have to be there and make that save.”

The Blue Jackets spent the rest of the third scrambling for the tying goal.

Fantilli went hard to the net, following the puck, when McNabb tried to leverage his stick to keep him away from Hart. The blade smacked right into Fantilli’s mouth and nose, sending the third-year center to the ice.

After a couple of seconds, he was up quickly and skating to the dressing room, leaving a trail of red behind him.

McNabb was given a double minor for high-sticking, putting the Blue Jackets on the power play for the final 2:59. Before the puck dropped, while they cleaned up Fantilli’s mess, Coyle was skating up and down the Blue Jackets’ bench, trying to keep the mood positive, he said.

Chinakhov took Fantilli’s spot on the right half wall, and it was from that spot that he drew iron behind Hart with 1:53 remaining.

It was about this time that Fantilli returned to the bench, shouting at Evason to let him know he was available. With 1:30 to go, Chinakhov rushed off the ice and Fantilli joined.

“I’m not surprised (Fantilli came back), but I didn’t know the extent of the injury,” Evason said. “He’s as gritty as anybody. He’s gonna come back if he can come back.”



## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets drop 5th straight, fall to Vegas Golden Knights

**By Dan Aulbach – December 13, 2025**

The Blue Jackets entered Nationwide Arena on Dec. 13 during a blizzard and left with their fifth straight loss, dropping late momentum in a 3-2 defeat to the Vegas Golden Knights.

After matching the Golden Knights' intensity for two periods, the Blue Jackets fell flat offensively in the third period. They got some much-needed momentum with a third-period goal from Yegor Chinakhov, but the Golden Knights shut down the pressure just over a minute later with a badly timed line change and a tying goal from third-line defenseman Ben Hutton.

Golden Knights left winger Mitch Marner assisted on his third goal of the game, this time to a looming Brayden McNabb on the right side of the net for a top corner shot.

With 2:59 left, Adam Fantilli got a stick to the face from McNabb, resulting in a double minor penalty and leading to a power play for the final three minutes of regulation. The Jackets pulled goalie Jet Greaves for a 6-on-4 for any last hope. They stalled and never got a shot close.

"It'd be nice to get that to an overtime or a shootout," said Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason. "We hit the post, we had a couple of opportunities there at the end. ... As far as our work, as far as our commitment, as far as our valuing how we need to play, we've seen a lot of that."

The Jackets applied plenty of pressure through the blue line to open up the first period, outshooting the Golden Knights, but broke through in transition at the 13-minute mark with smooth skating from Zach Werenski. Approaching the goal with a head full of steam, Werenski quickly flicked the puck back to center Charlie Coyle, who converted a flush wrist shot for his fifth goal of the season.

Penalty trouble caught up to the Blue Jackets when a goal from Pavel Dorofeyev got through on Vegas' first power play of the night. Moments after, Ivan Provorov scored, shooting up the middle, but the goal was reversed for a Miles Wood offside. Brenden Smith went to check Dorofeyev on the next Blue Jackets sequence, aiming for the chest and instead hitting him straight in the head for another Vegas power play.

Cole Sillinger had the best chance of any Blue Jacket to score in the latter half of the second period. He flew past the Golden Knights' defense, but shot straight at Hart's legs with 7:28 remaining; Coyle got stuffed on the ensuing rebound shot.

It's the 10th game of the season the Blue Jackets have dropped when starting with a lead. Late-game intensity has been an issue for Columbus, outscored 48-29 in the third period in 2025.

"I think defensively, [it] was definitely better," said Coyle. "It's not perfect, but I think it's a work in progress and it was a step in the right direction."

At 13-13-6, the Blue Jackets will look to change their luck with a Dec. 16 home game against the Anaheim Ducks.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Golden Knights deal Blue Jackets another gut punch: Takeaways

**By Brian Hedger – December 13, 2025**

The Blue Jackets had two main goals Dec. 13 at Nationwide Arena.

The first was to end a four-game losing streak. The second, right up there with the first, was increasing their commitment to playing "the right way," against the Vegas Golden Knights, a Stanley Cup contender.

In the end, they accomplished the second goal without achieving the first, losing their fifth straight game 3-2 after taking a 2-1 lead on Yegor Chinakhov's goal 4:49 into the third period. Despite feeling better about how they played overall, the Blue Jackets (13-13-6) again spun their wheels by losing for the 10th time in a game they held a lead.

Two more leads vanished against Vegas – 1-0 in the second and 2-1 in the third – and the latter was the Jackets' 11th blown lead in a third period. They all have been frustrating, but this one had to feel galling after working hard in practice Dec. 12 to address their level of dedication.

"We played our (tails) off," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It's unfortunate we didn't get rewarded. They played hard. They played right. For whatever reason, we're not catching a break here and there, (hit) a couple of posts, but we have to keep working, obviously, (and) doing all the right things. Continue to do that and things will go good."

Here are five takeaways:

### **Vegas Golden Knights make Columbus Blue Jackets pay for line change**

Almost a minute after Chinakhov's goal broke a 1-1 tie early in the third, the Blue Jackets' second forward line headed for the bench after defenseman Brendan Smith chipped the puck out of the Columbus zone.

It might have looked at ice level like a good spot to change lines, but Golden Knights defenseman Kaedan Korczak made the Jackets regret it by collecting the puck in the neutral zone and zipping a re-entry feed to Mitch Marner just outside the Columbus blue line.

Before Sean Monahan, Dmitri Voronkov and Isac Lundestrom could get comfortable on the Blue Jackets' bench, the Golden Knights had a 3-on-2 situation deep in the Columbus zone. Marner hit defenseman Ben Hutton with a pass in the slot and he beat goalie Jet Greaves with a wrist shot that tied it 2-2 just 1:03 after Chinakhov's goal.

It was the 11th time the Blue Jackets have blown a lead in the third period, and the loss dropped their record to 4-2-5 in those games. At least this one didn't happen in the late stages of the third, as most of the ones that preceded it did.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Jet Greaves shoulders tough loss**

Two of the Golden Knights' goals were scored with excellent shots by Pavel Dorofeyev to tie it 1-1 on a power play 41 seconds into the second period and Brayden McNabb with 6:47 left to break a 2-2 tie with the eventual winner.

Dorofeyev beat Greaves inside the right post from the right circle with a one-timer off Marner's feed, making the goalie pay for being a touch late closing off the short-side angle. McNabb sent his shot over Greaves' left shoulder and under the crossbar from a sharp angle on the short side, giving Marner his third primary assist of the game.

McNabb's feet were on the goal line when the puck left his stick, but Greaves didn't sidestep his part of the goal.

"I think it's both," he said. "Yes, it's a really good shot by him but at the end of the day I have to make that save, especially at that time of the game. So, it's something to learn from, for sure. I saw it. He put it into a good spot in the net, but I have to make that save."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets forward Yegor Chinakhov breaks scoring drought**

It was a long 19 games between goals for Chinakhov, which is why he looked more relieved than excited to put the Blue Jackets up 2-1 at 4:49 of the third. In fact, he demonstrably "removed" an imaginary monkey from his back before celebrating with teammates.

It's been a challenging season for Chinakhov, whose summer trade request didn't result in a trade. After starting the season as a healthy scratch, he's been used primarily on the fourth line and is averaging a career-low 10:03 in ice time per game. He's had a couple one-game trials on lines higher up the lineup, but moved right back to the fourth after not making an instant impact.

He'd still prefer to be traded, but continues to do what he can in a limited role. Evason and assistant Mike Haviland, who manages the power play, used Chinakhov during an extended power play in the final 2:59 after McNabb high-sticked Adam Fantilli in the face.

"It's pretty good for me (to score), so I can feel better, more confident, but we still need to win the game," he said.

McNabb's stick came up and struck Fantilli in the nose as he charged to the net on a rush with Kirill Marchenko late in the third. Fantilli stayed on the ice, prone, before being helped to his feet and skating off leaving a trail of blood on the ice.

McNabb was assessed a double-minor penalty for high-sticking, which would've extended into overtime had the Blue Jackets tied it, but the Golden Knights didn't let it get to OT. Fantilli, however, returned to the game quickly after getting something to stem the bleeding and sprinting back toward the bench to rejoin the game.

"I don't even know where he was leaking (blood from)," Evason said. "He's as gritty as anybody. He's going to come back if he can come back."

### **David Savard says Columbus Blue Jackets 'knew right away' that Zach Werenski had star potential**

David Savard, an alum honored during the Jackets' latest 25th Anniversary celebration weekend, had played in five NHL seasons when Zach Werenski broke into the league in 2016-17 as a dynamic rookie. Selected eighth overall in 2015, Werenski played his sophomore season at the University of Michigan before starting his professional career that spring by joining the AHL's Erie Monsters, now the Cleveland Monsters.

After helping the Monsters win the AHL's Calder Cup, Werenski started his NHL career in Columbus and made an instant impression as a young star with 11 goals, 36 assists and 47 points. It didn't take long for Savard or his veteran peers to realize the new kid was special.

"You could tell right away," Savard said. "The game's different when you go from college to pro, and right away, when he showed up on our team, he had a special talent of just finding ways to create offense."

Werenski has since improved his defensive game and taken on a key leadership role after learning the ropes from guys like Savard, Jack Johnson and his former defensive partner, Seth Jones. He finished runner up last season for the Norris Trophy, which is awarded to the NHL's top defenseman, and could be a finalist again with what he's doing this season.

Savard, who became close friends with Werenski prior to being traded in 2021, hopes to see him win it.

"I think everyone on the team knew he could do it, but I think he really ran with it, and he's been dominating the NHL, honestly, as one of the best defensemen," Savard said. "It's fun to see him carry the team in a way. I think he's the heartbeat, because when he's going, the team is going. It's fun to see him get all this responsibility and he deserves everything."

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Fall to Golden Knights as Losing Streak Reaches Five

**By Mark Scheig – December 13, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets entered Saturday night's game with a four-game losing streak. Thanks to another third-period blown lead, that streak is now at five.

Brayden McNabb's first goal of the season turned out to be the game winner. Carter Hart made 26 saves. The Vegas Golden Knights defeated the Blue Jackets 3-2.

The story of this game was the Blue Jackets again not being able to find success in the third period.

### **Game Recap**

The Blue Jackets came into Saturday's game trying to focus on a more defensive effort. Not only were they able to do that in the opening period, they scored the game's first goal.

Charlie Coyle sniped a shot past Carter Hart to open the scoring. Zach Werenski's pass made the goal happen. Cole Sillinger drew the second assist.

The rest of the first was a back-and-forth affair with each team taking a penalty. Both teams were able to successfully kill the resulting power plays off. The Blue Jackets held a 9-8 shot advantage in the first.

The Golden Knights however didn't waste any time to tie the game early in the second. With Damon Severson in the box, Pavel Dorofeyev scored his 13th goal of the season to tie Tomas Hertl for the team lead. Dorofeyev's shot found just enough room under Jet Greaves.

The Blue Jackets thought they scored shortly after. But a quick Golden Knights' challenge for offside came. Dmitri Voronkov was ahead of the play on the left wing before the goal.

Then with Brendan Smith in the box, the Golden Knights had another quick chance to take the lead on the power play. They failed to score.

The rest of the second was a tighter-checking game. Hart made three outstanding saves later in the second to preserve the 1-1 tie. He stopped Sillinger on a breakaway and then Coyle on the rebound. Hart then sprawled over to glove down a Boone Jenner chance. The Blue Jackets held a 19-15 shots advantage after 40 minutes.

The Blue Jackets had the Golden Knights at the end of their road trip. There was a chance to take advantage of a tired team. At 4:49 of the third, Yegor Chinakhov scored his third goal of the season to make it 2-1.

But as has been normal of late, the Blue Jackets not only couldn't hold onto the lead, they gave it up in short order.

It took defenseman Ben Hutton just 1:03 to make it 2-2. The Blue Jackets' forwards made a line change creating a 3-on-2 Golden Knights' rush. Hutton beat Greaves from the slot to gain momentum back.

That momentum created the game-winning goal as well. McNabb went upstairs for the 3-2 goal. That was his first goal of the season.

The Blue Jackets had one more chance to tie it late. McNabb high-sticked Fantilli drawing blood. Fantilli raced back to the room, got repaired and came back on the ice to play late on the power play.

Chinakhov hit the post, but that was as close as the Blue Jackets got. The 3-2 loss puts them four points clear in the basement in the Metropolitan Division at 13-13-6.

The Blue Jackets continue their homestand Tuesday night when they host the Anaheim Ducks. The Golden Nights will head home and take on the New Jersey Devils on Wednesday night.

## BlueJackets.com / Alumni Notebook: Wright gave his all in the Jackets' early years

**By Jeff Svoboda – December 14, 2025**

When you look at the Blue Jackets media guide, it's not hard to find Wright's name.

The original Blue Jacket scored 57 goals, tallied 108 points and totaled 436 penalty minutes in 309 games with Columbus, but those numbers understate his impact in the early years of the franchise.

Wright became a fan favorite in his five seasons with the Blue Jackets because he always seemed to rise to the moment. Three of the first seven hat tricks in franchise history were scored by Wright, as well as three of the first 15 overtime winners. He also remains eighth in franchise history in penalty minutes, as he was never afraid to defend his teammates or join into a scrum when the moment arose.

And, in fact, a fight is one of the moments that he's most remembered for – at least in the Wright household. On Nov. 9, 2002, the Blue Jackets beat the Rangers by a 6-3 score in Nationwide Arena, and while Wright contributed a shorthanded goal to the cause, he also was part of a memorable line brawl as the final horn blew.

Wright and massive Rangers wing Sandy McCarthy faced off as an undercard to the main event between Grant Marshall and Krzysztof Oliwa, then as Wright was being escorted to the CBJ bench by a linesman, he loaded up and tried to kick a stray New York helmet with his left foot.

Instead, Wright missed, then spun down to the ice on his follow through, drawing a smile and chuckle from McCarthy – as well as Wright's wife, Christina.

"I was cut from both eyelids, and I was mad," Wright remembers. "It was over by the penalty box, and I was skating off and getting escorted off the ice. I was yelling at (Rangers head coach) Bryan Trottier. There was a Ranger helmet at center ice, and I tried to kick their helmet into the bench, and I fell.

"You know, you just got beat up in front of 20,000 people. Now you fall. You're bleeding from both eyelids. So I come out after, and my wife's waiting, and she's like, 'That is the funniest thing I've ever seen.' So, yeah, it's alive in our household. ... My kids play it for me all the time."

That passion and never-back-down attitude are among the reasons Wright is remembered so fondly by the CBJ faithful. He arrived in Columbus as part of the 2000 expansion draft, selected from Pittsburgh after spending four seasons with the Penguins and four more with Edmonton, who chose him in the first round of the 1991 NHL draft.

After scoring just five goals with six assists in 188 games in his first three years in Pittsburgh, the 26-year-old Wright was coming off a career year (12 goals, 22 points in 50 games) with the Pens when he was chosen by the Blue Jackets.

Wright had played with such names as Jaromir Jagr, Mario Lemieux, Ron Francis, Alex Kovalev, Martin Starka and Petr Nedved in Pittsburgh, then found himself in a very different spot in both the hockey world and the lineup when he arrived in Columbus. Wright averaged 16 goals and 118 penalty minutes per season in his first three years with the Blue Jackets and twice was named an alternate captain.

"I think it was a unique situation for me coming from a team like in Pittsburgh, where I had to kind of play a certain role to stay in the lineup," Wright said. "Then I had the opportunity through the expansion draft to come to Columbus, and we were a little bit of a misfit team. You know, I kind of always say we were the Bad News Bears. And I say that in a good way, because we did a lot of stuff off the ice, like, we were really tight. We didn't win a ton of games, but we were pretty close."

"I think the city of Columbus and the fans in the original days, they appreciated hard work and that kind of tenacity that I brought. I usually bit off a little bit more than I could chew a lot of times as well."

Wright left quite a legacy in Columbus, as he was thrice nominated for the NHL's King Clancy Memorial Trophy for leadership and was selected as the team's Community MVP in 2002-03 after helping get the team's Hats for Heroes program off the ground and dedicating himself to pediatric cancer causes.

Off the ice and on it, Wright exemplified the early years of the CBJ franchise, and the city remained home as he served as first a development coach and later as director of amateur scouting with the Blue Jackets.

"I relish my time here," said Wright, who is now director of player personnel for the Los Angeles Kings. "For me, when I think of the most success and when I think of myself as a player, I think myself as a Blue Jacket."

### **Savard Looks Back**

If there were to be a trophy named after Savard in the CBJ locker room, it would be the golden ice bag.

No one took more punishment from pucks in their career than the defenseman, who used his big frame, sizable backside and a high tolerance for pain to block 958 shots, the most in Blue Jackets history.

After leaving to win the Stanley Cup with Tampa Bay in 2021 and then spending four years with his hometown team in Montreal, Savard called it quits at the end of last season, retiring after 870 games and 14 seasons.

And yes, it feels good to leave the bumps and bruises behind.

"I feel better," Savard said with a laugh. "Some nights it felt a little harder than other nights, but it definitely feels nice to not have the ice bags every day."

That Savard became known for preventing goals more than scoring them in his NHL career is a lesson in perseverance. Savard had 13 goals and 77 points in 64 games his final season in juniors with Moncton, then tallied 11 times among 44 points in his first pro season with AHL Springfield.

But while Savard had natural offensive talent, he realized that his ticket to not just making it to but staying in the NHL was dedicating himself to the defensive side of the game. There are only so many jobs for offensive defensemen, and while Savard didn't have the skill of a Zach Werenski, he did have the heart and ability to sell out to stop opposing teams.

"I didn't want to go back down (to the minors)," said Savard, who spent the majority of three seasons in the AHL before sticking full-time with the Blue Jackets. "So I just had to figure out a way to be in the lineup every night, and I kind of saw a chance to be a PK guy and to be good defensively. I jumped on that challenge, and honestly, I kind of fell in love with it."



"I just loved when the team took penalties and stuff. Like, the offensive guy loves when there's a power play, but it was the same thing for a defensive guy. When there's six PKs and you end up killing all of them, it feels pretty good at the end of the night."

In the end, it proved to be a smart decision for Savard, who spent 10 seasons with the Blue Jackets, totaling 41 goals (tied for third among CBJ defensemen) and 166 points (fourth among CBJ D) in 597 games before being traded to the Lightning at the deadline in 2021. He was a model of consistency in Columbus, playing all 82 games twice, placing second all-time among CBJ defensemen with a plus-24 rating, and blocking at least 100 shots seven times with the team.

His return to Columbus this weekend brought back memories, especially because previous trips with the Habs didn't allow him the chance to truly enjoy the city he called home for so long.

"Honestly, I'm super happy to be here," he said. "Everything happens so fast when you get traded, and we did come back to play some games, but I actually never came back and just kind of relaxed and walked around. I went back to the little spots in the last few days that I used to go to all the time ... so it's fun for me to be back in the city."

And through a fluke of timing, Savard was in Columbus to see one of his career records go by the wayside. His 597 games played were the most in franchise history for a defenseman until Werenski skated in his 598th career game Thursday with Savard in attendance, and the former CBJ blueliner was happy to pass the torch.

"I knew it was going to happen at some point," Savard said. "It's cool. I didn't even know it was me for a long time until it kind of popped up that he was going to beat me or something this year. So that's cool for him."

## The Athletic / NHL future watch: Who's the fastest-rising prospect in each team's pipeline?

By The Athletic NHL Staff – Dec. 15, 2025

It's what every NHL organization wants to see in its prospect pipeline: the player who takes the next step and shows he is ready for more responsibility and a look at a higher level. Now, over two months into the 2025-26 hockey season, and with the 2026 World Juniors around the corner, these rising-stock prospects are starting to emerge.

Who's rising the fastest for each team?

*The Athletic* posed that question to its NHL staff, stipulating that while very recent call-ups are eligible, the prospects should not be current full-time NHL players.

In response, we heard about top picks ready to make the leap, hidden gems earning bigger opportunities and players on the precipice of making an NHL impact. Here are the picks.

### **Anaheim Ducks**

#### **Lucas Pettersson, C**

It's not easy for a teenager to gain quality ice time in the veteran-laden SHL. But Pettersson, a 2024 second-round selection, has been finishing his scoring chances and has vastly improved this season with Brynas IF. He'll learn a lot from highly respected, longtime NHL forwards Nicklas Backstrom and Jakob Silfverberg before coming to North America. — *Eric Stephens*

### **Boston Bruins**

#### **Dean Letourneau, C**

Letourneau had zero goals in 36 games as a Boston College freshman in 2024-25. Part of that lack of production was because he was an 18-year-old who had accelerated his NCAA arrival by a season. Now that he's acclimated, the 6-foot-7, 228-pound center has become a point-per-game player (nine goals and 17 points in 16 games). — *Fluto Shinzawa*

### **Buffalo Sabres**

#### **Isak Rosen, RW**

Rosen, a 2021 first-rounder, had an uneventful rookie camp entering a key season for his development. Then he got off to a hot start in the AHL and earned an NHL call-up. He put up seven points in 10 games in his first stint in Buffalo and was recently called up again. He's showing a scoring touch but also has the speed and stick to be a reliable defensive player. — *Matthew Fairburn*

### **Calgary Flames**

#### **Matvei Gridin, RW**

The Russian winger had a dominant 2024-25 season in the QMJHL with Shawinigan, winning both offensive and overall rookie of the year honors. Months later, he scored his first NHL goal in his debut

against the Edmonton Oilers. He's now at a near-point-per-game pace in the AHL with the Calgary Wranglers. — *Julian McKenzie*

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

#### **Joel Nystrom, RHD**

The Hurricanes' wave of injuries on defense to start the season has a silver lining: Nystrom. The 2021 seventh-round pick, in his first full season in North America, was recalled Oct. 23 and played 24 games. Jaccob Slavin's return Sunday pushed Nystrom out of the lineup and back to the AHL, but the Swedish rookie's solid play earned him a four-year contract extension on Friday that will pay him a total of \$4.9 million. It's no surprise Carolina would want to lock him up — Nystrom is a perfect fit for the Hurricanes' system, a defenseman who can skate, aggressively gaps up defensively and is quick to get shots through from the blue line. — *Cory Lavalette*

### **Chicago Blackhawks**

#### **Roman Kantserov, RW**

Kantserov, a 2023 second-round draft pick, looked like he had a chance to be a decent prospect after the last couple of seasons in the KHL. He's gone to a whole other level this season. Through 34 games, he leads the KHL with 22 goals and is tied for second in 39 points. Kirill Kaprizov was the last player around that age to produce similarly in the KHL. With increased production, Kantserov looks a lot more like a top-six NHL winger. His KHL contract expires after this season, and he is expected to sign and join the Blackhawks next season. — *Scott Powers*

### **Colorado Avalanche**

#### **Francesco Dell'Elce, LHD**

The third-round pick from the 2025 draft has continued to impress at the collegiate level. Dell'Elce is a left-shot defenseman who moves well and creates offense from the point. He had a breakout freshman season at UMass with 24 points in 40 games last year, and is on an even better pace as a sophomore. The 20-year-old already has three goals and 10 assists in the first 18 games for the Minutemen. — *Jesse Granger*

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

#### **Luca Pinelli, C**

Pinelli is 5-foot-9, 176 pounds. He was a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2023, not one of the Blue Jackets' many recent first-round picks. However, Pinelli is ahead of schedule, becoming a point-a-game player in the AHL (seven goals, nine assists in 19 games) and showing well in a recent three-game call-up to the Blue Jackets. Coaches love Pinelli's pace and fearlessness, his willingness to battle for pucks and play in traffic, and, of course, his ability to score. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was so enamored that he sent Pinelli out for the first shift of overtime (against Sidney Crosby) in a Nov. 28 game vs. Pittsburgh. — *Aaron Portzline*

### **Dallas Stars**

#### **Cameron Schmidt, RW**

The Stars have only made one first-round pick and one second-round pick in the last three years. That's the cost of doing business when you're going for a championship every year. So there aren't any can't-miss prospects in the system. That said, Schmidt, a third-rounder this past summer, is tearing it up for the WHL's Vancouver Giants, third in the league in scoring with 18 goals and 26 assists in 32 games. At 5-foot-8, 158 pounds, it's fair to wonder if Schmidt has the size to play in the NHL. But he's certainly got speed and skill to spare. — *Mark Lazerus*

## **Detroit Red Wings**

### **Eddie Genborg, RW**

The Red Wings' 2025 second-round pick was drafted for how hard he could be to play against, with size, skating and physicality on the forecheck. And none of that has changed. However, his stock is rising this season because of how much offense he's been able to produce in the SHL at age 18. His 15 points in 26 games are third among all U20 skaters in the league, behind only Ivar Stenberg and Anton Frondell.

— *Max Bultman*

## **Edmonton Oilers**

### **Quinn Hutson, RW**

Hutson was signed by Edmonton in the spring out of Boston University. His two-way ability and speed made him an attractive signing for the Oilers, who are badly in need of plug-and-play forwards who can push for NHL opportunities. Hutson is on fire, both as a two-way winger and as a goal scorer (16 goals in 24 games). He is undrafted, 23, and on the kind of scoring run that sometimes earns an NHL recall.

— *Allan Mitchell*

## **Florida Panthers**

### **Shea Busch, LW**

Big, physical and loves the front of the net: He'll fit right in as a Panther. Busch, whose father played pro in Germany, came through the Junior A route in the BCHL but has made a huge impact in his second WHL season on the league's top team. He's up to more than a goal a game with the Everett Silvertips so far this season despite missing time due to injury, and many of his tallies come from the hard areas. He has work to do on his skating and is committed to Penn State, so the pro game is likely a ways away. However, the 2025 fourth-round pick's rapid improvement is worth noting. — *James Mirtle*

## **Los Angeles Kings**

### **Jared Woolley, LHD**

The 19-year-old Woolley, a 2024 sixth-round pick, has impressed in past Kings camps and is flourishing this year as the top defenseman for the reigning Memorial Cup champion London Knights, one of the Ontario Hockey League's premier franchises. The Kings signed Woolley to an entry-level contract in March, and he could be contending for the club's blue line in a couple of years. — *Eric Stephens*

## **Minnesota Wild**

### **Charlie Stramel, C**

After two tough years at Wisconsin, the 2023 No. 21 pick transferred to Michigan State to be coached by his old U.S. National Team Development Program coach, Adam Nightingale. Stramel's game has

improved significantly over the two years since. After scoring 20 points in 60 games at Wisconsin, he had 27 in 37 last season and is second on the Spartans with 18 in 16 this season. He also leads the team with a plus-16 rating and was tied for eighth in the nation with 196 faceoff wins through Thursday.

Nightingale told *The Athletic* last week that Stramel is the best net-front player he has ever coached.

Former NHLer and Spartans national champ Justin Abdelkader has come in to work with Stramel.

— *Michael Russo*

## **Montreal Canadiens**

### **Bryce Pickford, RHD**

Pickford scored 20 goals in 48 games last season, his second year of draft eligibility. He was playing on a powerhouse Medicine Hat team with Gavin McKenna and Cayden Lindstrom that won the WHL championship and lost in the Memorial Cup final. The Canadiens drafted him with the No. 81 pick in 2025. This season, with no McKenna and no Lindstrom, Pickford has 24 goals in 30 games, first in the WHL, as a defenseman. — *Arpon Basu*

## **Nashville Predators**

### **Yegor Surin, LW**

Surin just turned 19 in August, and he's Yaroslavl's second-leading scorer on the year (as well as the KHL's top U20 scorer) while playing just 14-15 minutes a night. He's got this year and next on his KHL contract, so Predators fans will have to wait until 2027 to potentially get eyes on him in North America, but they're going to like his brand of hockey when he does. He's a scrappy and skilled player who is always involved in something — whether it's making plays between the whistles or stirring something up after them. — *Scott Wheeler*

## **New Jersey Devils**

### **Mikhail Yegorov, G**

Yegorov is on this list mostly because of his performance as a freshman at Boston University. The 2024 second-rounder had a .927 save percentage that year. That's regressed this season (.892), and the Terriers are off to a tough 8-8-1 start. New Jersey doesn't have any other obvious picks, in part because so many of its promising young players are in the NHL. Yegorov isn't the Devils' top prospect, but he's probably risen the most of any New Jersey player since he was drafted. — *Peter Baugh*

## **New York Islanders**

### **Jacob Kvasnicka, RW**

Kvasnicka didn't have a great draft season, but he's looked promising in his draft-plus-one in the WHL. He's a good skater with legit skill who has shown more consistent effort. His size is the only issue in his projection at 5-foot-11. — *Corey Pronman*

## **New York Rangers**

### **Gabe Perreault, LW**

Power winger Jaroslav Chmelař deserves a nod as an under-the-radar prospect who recently earned a call-up, but Perreault has to be the choice. He may be the only forward in the pipeline with legitimate top-six upside, and he's showing why in his first full pro season. The 20-year-old needs to work on his

“physical maturity,” as Rangers coach Mike Sullivan put it, before being deemed NHL-ready. However, it hasn’t hindered his production with AHL Hartford, where he leads the team with 17 points (10 goals and seven assists) in 20 games. An Eastern Conference scout called him “too smart” for the AHL. — *Vincent Z. Mercogliano*

## **Ottawa Senators**

### **Stephen Halliday, C**

The 23-year-old continues to generate positive momentum after a successful rookie camp and a solid start in his second pro AHL season. And with injuries plaguing the Senators, Halliday has been called up to play center in recent games. Even some brief spells on the power play. For a prospect pool that isn’t considered among the league’s best, Halliday is making the most of his NHL time, which is a win for the Senators. — *Julian McKenzie*

## **Philadelphia Flyers**

### **Ty Murchison, LHD**

The easy answer would be Porter Martone, whose stock has already risen at Michigan State after the Flyers picked him No. 6 in the 2025 draft. But let’s instead go with Murchison, who was a surprise call-up a week ago. A fifth-round pick in 2021, Murchison has not only leapfrogged other defensemen in the organization, but he was also given a chance over ineffective veteran Egor Zamula, too. He won’t ever be a star, but could still develop into a solid NHL depth guy. — *Kevin Kurz*

## **Pittsburgh Penguins**

### **Will Horcoff, LW**

The 24th pick in the 2025 draft, Horcoff was obviously a player the Penguins liked when they drafted him in June. They love him now. The 6-foot-5 forward is tied as the NCAA’s leading goal scorer this season, putting on quite a show playing for Michigan. While Horcoff is probably a year or two away from being NHL-ready, the Penguins are excited about his development and delighted that his goal-scoring touch is further along than anyone could have anticipated. The Penguins believe this player has the potential to become a top-six mainstay at the NHL level. — *Josh Yohe*

## **San Jose Sharks**

### **Joshua Ravensbergen, G**

The 19-year-old Ravensbergen is one of the three goalies Canada brought to its World Juniors selection camp. Taken with the 30th pick in the 2025 draft, the Prince George Cougars goalie leads all WHL netminders with 16 wins and sits in the top five in save percentage (.921) and goals-against average (2.50). — *Eric Stephens*

## **Seattle Kraken**

### **Jake O’Brien, C**

O’Brien is the OHL’s second leading scorer and is having a thoroughly dominant draft-plus-one campaign for the Brantford Bulldogs. The big, skilled center was invited to Team Canada’s U20 training camp and could slot into a scoring-line role, especially if fellow Kraken prospect Berkly Catton, who is currently injured, isn’t released by Seattle to participate in the tournament. — *Thomas Drance*

## **St. Louis Blues**

### **Adam Jiricek, RHD**

The Blues liked the Czech defenseman so much that they selected him at No. 16 in 2024 even though he was recovering from multiple injuries. Then he went to the OHL's Brantford Bulldogs and dealt with more injuries. Blues general manager Doug Armstrong said the goal this season was for him to just get on the ice and stay healthy. Jiricek has done that and more. He has 10 goals and 29 points in 25 games, he made the Czech roster for World Juniors, and the Blues believe he has true No. 1 defenseman potential. — *Jeremy Rutherford*

## **Tampa Bay Lightning**

### **Benjamin Rautiainen, C**

Liiga doesn't carry the same weight it used to, but what Rautiainen has done at that level the last two seasons is still undeniably impressive for his age. He's got a chance to lead the league in scoring as a 20-year-old fourth-round pick. He's got twice as many points as the nearest U21 player, and is significantly outproducing recent near-point-per-game seasons from players his current age, such as Ville Koivunen and Jani Nyman, who are both in the NHL now. He's average-sized, but his hands and skill level get high marks. — *Scott Wheeler*

## **Toronto Maple Leafs**

### **Tinus Luc Koblar, C**

Koblar, 18, has gone from being the last pick in the second round of the 2025 draft to, in the words of his Leksands coach Johan Hedberg, potentially the SHL team's "best player by the end of the year." That's an incredible jump, considering there was a possibility Koblar would play Under-20 hockey this season. Instead, the skilled but pesky playmaking center's quick adaptation to the pro game suggests any NHL future could come sooner than anticipated. — *Joshua Kloke*

## **Utah Mammoth**

### **Daniil But, LW**

But, drafted No. 12 in 2023, has had an auspicious transition to North America. The hulking 6-foot-6 winger was producing at a near-point-per-game clip in the AHL, which has recently earned him a call-up. But hasn't looked out of place in Utah's top six, flashing exciting hands and skill, while registering one point in seven games. — *Harman Dayal*

## **Vancouver Canucks**

### **Braeden Cootes, C**

The Canucks' first-round pick at the 2025 draft, Cootes' scoring rate has taken a step forward in his draft-plus-one campaign in the WHL, and he was recently named to Team Canada's U20 training camp (where he's expected to make the World Junior team as an 18-year-old). Cootes is skilled and fast, has mature details in his game and brings leadership qualities to boot. He's clearly on the fast track and trending toward being a full-time NHL player as a teenager as soon as next season. — *Thomas Drance*

## **Vegas Golden Knights**

### **Braedan Bowman, RW**

The undrafted 22-year-old wasn't on many radars before this season, but Bowman has taken an opportunity and run with it for the Golden Knights. He parlayed a red-hot start in the AHL into the chance to play with Jack Eichel on Vegas' top line when Mark Stone went out with an injury. He took advantage immediately with four goals in his first six games, and has played well enough to hold onto the spot, even with Stone back in the lineup. — *Jesse Granger*

### **Washington Capitals**

#### **Ilya Protas, C**

At some point soon, the Capitals will have two Protases (or "Proti") on the roster. Ilya, the younger brother of top-sixer Aliaksei, is a similar player — enormous and enormously skilled — and he's having himself a nice season as a 19-year-old with AHL Hershey. A third-round pick in 2024, he had a seven-game goal streak in November, leads the team in goals and points, plays in all situations and generally seems close to NHL-ready. Spencer Carbery has taken note, too. — *Sean Gentile*

### **Winnipeg Jets**

#### **Elias Salomonsson, RHD**

The 21-year-old Salomonsson showed promise in his recent four-game NHL call-up. His outlet passes were crisp, his read of the defensive zone was solid and he put up the same kind of mediocre possession numbers as Winnipeg's more veteran third-pairing defensemen did. There were mistakes, too, including giveaways that led to scoring chances, but it's a big deal that Salomonsson stepped up and didn't look out of place. — *Murat Ates*