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Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets 2025 offseason: Internal growth needed

By Brian Hedger – July 2, 2025

Don Waddell and the Blue Jackets' front office tried to give their roster a boost with outside help during the NHL draft and July 1 start of free agency.

The president/general manager and his executive team kicked the tires on potential unrestricted free agents. They assessed trade proposals. They also watched a bunch of UFAs re-sign with their teams, and they backed away from splashy moves such as trading for star defenseman Noah Dobson and chasing forward Nikolaj Ehlers, the top available player on the open market.

Ehlers was still courting interested teams July 2 while the price for his signature likely ballooned, and the ask from the Islanders for Dobson — a right-handed shooter with skill and size — was higher for the Blue Jackets than for the Montreal Canadiens.

So, the draft and free-agent frenzy became more of a freezeout in Columbus, where Waddell traded for veteran forwards Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood from the Colorado Avalanche on June 27 and scrambled to keep the Jackets' blueline intact with new contracts for Dante Fabbro on June 29 and Ivan Provorov on July 1.

A host of unsigned Columbus free agents are scattering across the league with new teams, leaving Blue Jackets fans to wonder the same thing.

Have they actually improved?

The answer won't be known until October, but an argument can be made that things aren't much better or worse for the Jackets than how they ended 2024-25, two points shy of the playoffs. Here's a review of the Jackets' offseason on July 2:

Columbus Blue Jackets: 2025-26 departures

After signing Provorov, the Blue Jackets had eight players awaiting the arrival of July 1 as UFAs seeking new teams.

James Van Riemsdyk (Detroit Red Wings), Sean Kuraly (Boston Bruins), Justin Danforth (Buffalo Sabres) and Jordan Harris (Bruins) signed contracts on July 1. Forwards Luke Kunin, Christian Fischer, Kevin Labanc and defenseman Jack Johnson remained unsigned starting July 2.

Van Riemsdyk, Kuraly, Danforth and Johnson spent all last season in Columbus, so their departures from the lineup and locker room will be felt most. Kuraly and Danforth were bottom-six stalwarts, while Van Riemsdyk logged time at left wing on all four lines with an impressive season in his mid-30s.

Backup goalie Daniil Tarasov (Florida Panthers) and forward prospect Gavin Brindley (Avalanche) also left via separate trades.

Columbus Blue Jackets: 2025-26 arrivals

There will be three new faces to learn up front with Coyle, Wood and Isac Lundestrom joining the Blue Jackets this offseason.

Coyle, a right-handed shooting center who wins a lot of draws, was acquired in a June 27 trade with Colorado along with Wood, a blazing fast depth winger likely ticketed for the fourth line. Brindley and two draft picks went to the Avalanche in exchange.

Lundestrom, signed as a replacement option for Danforth and/or Kuraly on the fourth line, agreed to a two-year contract on July 1 worth \$1.3 million per season. After playing the first seven years of his NHL career with the Anaheim Ducks, this will be a fresh start for the Swedish center selected 23rd overall in 2018.

Columbus Blue Jackets: 2025 summer retention

This is where Waddell made his biggest splash of the summer by racing to re-sign Fabbro and Provorov to extensions before the NHL opened free agency at noon July 1. Provorov's new contract is a seven-year deal worth \$59.5 million that works out to a salary-cap hit of \$8.5 million.

He's expected to reprise his main role from 2024-25 as Denton Mateychuk's defensive partner on the second pairing, while Fabbro is expected to stay with Zach Werenski as the top pairing. Fabbro's new deal spans four years with an average annual cap charge of \$4.125 million per season.

The Blue Jackets looked at potential replacements for both but came up empty and circled back to re-sign two key defensemen who wanted to stay in Columbus. Fabbro's deal appears to be a bit of a bargain compared to what he might have gotten on the market, while Provorov's salary looks inflated.

It shouldn't be considered inflated in two or three years, however, as Provorov remains in his prime and the league's skyrocketing cap ceiling exceeds \$110 million.

"Fabbro and Provorov, if you look at two of your guys who are playing in your top four, and you look to see what's out there in the unrestricted free agent list ... we certainly felt we know these players," Waddell said. "Sometimes, it's better with what you know than what you don't know, and we know these guys are both committed to doing the right things to help us win."

Columbus Blue Jackets: 2025 remaining 'to do' list

The Blue Jackets still must re-sign power forward Dmitri Voronkov, who topped 20 goals last season in his second NHL campaign.

He's a restricted free agent with arbitration rights, which means he could file for salary arbitration to determine his pay level for the next one or two years. Most teams don't let it get that far, but it got fairly close in July 2024 with Kirill Marchenko.

Other teams could also sign Voronkov to an offer sheet, which would give Waddell a week to decide whether to match it or let him leave for draft pick compensation as determined by the forward's new salary-cap charge.

Mikael Pyhtia, an RFA forward without arbitration rights, also needs a new contract.

Columbus Blue Jackets: Projected 2025-26 roster

Barring trades or offseason injuries, the Blue Jackets know what their lineup will look like starting training camp in September 2025. Here's a glance:

Forwards

Dmitri Voronkov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko

Boone Jenner – Adam Fantilli – Kent Johnson

Yegor Chinakhov – Charlie Coyle – Mathieu Olivier

Cole Sillinger – Isac Lundestrom – Miles Wood

Extra: Zach Aston-Reese

Defensemen

Zach Werenski – Dante Fabbro

Denton Mateychuk – Ivan Provorov

Damon Severson – Erik Gudbranson

Extra: Jake Christiansen

Goalies

Elvis Merzlikins

Jet Greaves

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets re-sign defenseman Ivan Provorov

Portrait of Brian Hedger – June 30, 2025

Don Waddell is checking off another priority item from his offseason to-do list as the Blue Jackets' president/general manager.

After re-signing defenseman Dante Fabbro to a four-year contract extension worth \$16.5 million on June 29, Columbus finalized a contract to re-sign defenseman Ivan Provorov on July 1, inking him to a seven-year contract extension worth an average of \$8.5 million and \$59.5 million total.

"Ivan Provorov is the consummate pro and has been an important player during his two seasons in Columbus, so we are thrilled that he will continue to be a Blue Jacket for many years to come," Waddell said in a statement. "He is smart, talented, can play in all situations and has been remarkably consistent and durable throughout his career, and we believe his best seasons are ahead of him."

After signing Provorov, the Blue Jackets are \$21.8 million beneath the NHL's salary-cap ceiling of \$95.5 million with a signed roster of 20 players — 11 forwards, seven defensemen and two goalies.

Provorov, 28, technically became an unrestricted free agent at noon July 1 while the final structure of his new contract was hashed out. The team made it official two hours after the NHL's window for free agency opened. The Blue Jackets have nine players who are now UFAs and forward Dmitri Voronkov, a restricted free agent, can sign a contract offer sheet elsewhere that Columbus could match.

Provorov has played two seasons in Columbus after the Blue Jackets acquired him in 2023 from the Philadelphia Flyers in a three-team trade that included the Los Angeles Kings. He has become a fixture in the top two defensive pairings.

The Blue Jackets will keep their same top seven defensemen who finished the 2024-25 season, when they made a surprising rise up the Eastern Conference standings to finish two points shy of the playoffs. Eighth defenseman Jordan Harris, a pending restricted free agent who was acquired in August 2024 as part of a trade for Patrik Laine, was not tendered a qualifying offer and will become an unrestricted free agent on July 1.

Fabbro spent most of his first season in Columbus as Zach Werenski's partner on the top pairing, while Provorov solidified the second pairing.

Provorov also played a stint as Werenski's partner prior to Fabbro's arrival, but moving back a pairing gave the Blue Jackets a deeper top-four on the blue line. Providing size, strength and grit, Provorov is a solid two-way defender who comfortably plays either side of the ice with a left-handed shot. He's also willing to play through pain to stay in the lineup, which further endears him to teammates, coaches and GMs.

Heading into his 10th NHL season, Provorov has played 696 games between the Flyers and Blue Jackets. He has missed only three games in his NHL career, sitting out with the Flyers in 2021-22 due to COVID-19 protocols. Provorov again played all 82 games for the Blue Jackets in 2024-25 despite a thumb injury that occurred Dec. 6.

After jamming his left thumb hard into the base of the wall, Provorov's thumb bent awkwardly out of position and knocked him out of the game. He wanted to return, but the Jackets' medical staff held him out. They couldn't keep him out of the lineup any longer though. Provorov returned in the next game at the Winnipeg Jets and didn't miss time the rest of the season.

“He’s the ultimate pro,” Waddell said. “I remember when he dislocated his thumb, I said, ‘How long is this going to keep you out?’ And he said, ‘Don, I broke my thumb, not my foot,’ and he didn’t miss a game.”

Had either Provorov or Fabbro reached July 1 unsigned, each could’ve had multiple teams chasing their signatures while still in their primes.

Keeping them gives the Blue Jackets stability plus a better handle on how much salary they can designate to re-signing other pending free agents, exploring the UFA and trade markets, and retaining a group of young impact players over the next few years that includes Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger and Denton Mateychuk.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets sign depth forward Isac Lundestrom after losing Justin Danforth

Portrait of Brian Hedger – July 1, 2025

Needing more depth at center, the Blue Jackets signed Isac Lundestrom on July 1 to a two-year contract worth \$2.6 million.

Lundestrom, 25, accounts for \$1.3 million against the NHL salary cap and provides another forward option for the fourth line after Justin Danforth left as a free agent on a two-year deal with the Buffalo Sabres worth \$3.6 million and \$1.8 million per year.

Earlier on July 1, the Blue Jackets finalized a new contract with defenseman Ivan Provorov and signed one-year, two-way contracts with forward Owen Sillinger and defenseman Christian Jaros. Those were the only Columbus signings on the NHL's first day of free agency.

Lundestrom, selected 23rd overall by the Anaheim Ducks in 2018, made his NHL debut at age 19.

He's played the first seven years of his career with the Ducks, carving out a niche as a dependable two-way center on the fourth line. Lundestrom doesn't produce much offense with 35 goals, 49 assists and 84 points in 337 career games, but drew the attention of Blue Jackets scouts in May 2025 at the world championships with 1-3-4 in 10 games for Sweden.

He'll now get a chance to earn the fourth-line center role in Columbus, which could feature Zach Aston-Reese as one winger and newly-acquired speedster Miles Wood as the other. Lundestrom's best NHL season in Anaheim was 2021-22, when he finished with a 16-13-29 scoring line in 80 games.

Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets ready for NHL free agency, but challenges abound as Columbus retools roster

Portrait of Brian Hedger – June 30, 2025

The Blue Jackets nearly finished their 2024-25 season with a storybook ending in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Needing to win out over six games to stave off elimination, they rattled off six straight victories with a hot rookie in net for the final five, including three shutouts.

Regardless, the margin between Columbus and the Montreal Canadiens was too big. The upstart Blue Jackets, the NHL's most improved team with a 23-point gain in the standings from 2023-24, finished two points shy of the playoffs. They went into the offseason focused on qualifying for the postseason in 2025-26, even while knowing their roster would undergo changes.

And then nothing changed until June 26, when backup goalie Daniil Tarasov was traded to the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers for a fifth-round draft pick to officially get the Blue Jackets' roster retooling off the ground.

A day later, June 27, they acquired forwards Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood from the Colorado Avalanche for prospect Gavin Brindley and two draft picks, and two days after that, following the NHL draft, defenseman Dante Fabbro signed a four-year contract extension June 29 to avoid free agency.

The job is only half-done, though.

Don Waddell, in his second season as the Blue Jackets' president/general manager, still hopes to sign or acquire a top-four defenseman and top-six forward as the NHL's window for free agency looms at Noon on July 1.

"Everybody looks at the same list we're looking at, with all the free agents out there, and it's not like a plethora of players," Waddell said. "There's a lot of players (available), but not a lot of top players. But my job as the general manager is to stay in touch with the people who are part of the process here, and come July 1, if we have needs, we'll certainly go out and try to address them."

Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' situation before the doors swing open for free agents:

Blue Jackets free agents who aren't expected to stay

After re-signing Fabbro, the Blue Jackets still have eight pending unrestricted free agents. Those most likely to explore the open market for deals elsewhere are forwards James van Riemsdyk, Sean Kuraly, Luke Kunin, Christian Fischer and Kevin Labanc plus depth defenseman Jack Johnson.

Forward Mikael Pyyhtia and defenseman Jordan Harris, pending restricted free agents, would join that list if the Blue Jackets don't extend them qualifying offers by 5 p.m. June 30.

Defenseman Ivan Provorov and forward Justin Danforth are also pending UFAs. Waddell said negotiating with Provorov is a "priority," while Danforth's versatility as a right-handed forward who can play center could bump him up the GM's list of players to retain.

Columbus' hopes for free agency, trade market

Competition on the open market will be heated for all top players available, since the NHL's skyrocketing salary-cap ceiling has allowed more teams to retain pending UFAs. As Waddell said, there won't be many impact players available at any position, so those that are will likely command exorbitant salaries.

Waddell will pay a high price tag for certain players, but don't expect him to do it just to fill positions.

Some of the top forwards who might be available include Mitch Marner (Toronto Maple Leafs), Nikolaj Ehlers (Winnipeg Jets), Patrick Kane (Detroit Red Wings), Brock Boeser (Vancouver Canucks), Brad Marchand (Florida Panthers) and Mikael Granlund (Dallas Stars).

Defensive options if Provorov departs include Aaron Ekblad (Florida Panthers), Vladislav Gavrikov (Los Angeles Kings), Dmitry Orlov (Carolina Hurricanes), Brent Burns (Carolina Hurricanes), Cody Ceci (Dallas Stars) and Matt Grzelcyk (Anaheim Ducks).

The Buffalo Sabres are also listening to offers for Bowen Byrum, a young left-handed defenseman who can play either side.

Jackets are well positioned for contract offer sheets

Flush with about \$30 million in salary-cap space, the Blue Jackets have an enviable position with contract offer sheets on the RFA market.

They have a desirable RFA of their own to re-sign with Dmitri Voronkov, but Waddell has the resources to match any offer sheets the Russian power forward might sign with another team. Likewise, they have the money and required draft pick compensation to make a splash by signing an RFA to an offer sheet in the highest salary range (above \$11,700,193) and fourth-highest range (\$4,680,077 to \$7,020,113).

The highest range requires a team to give up its next four first-round picks as compensation, while the fourth-highest tier requires a team's first and third picks in 2026. The picks have to be that team's own, not those acquired from other teams.

The salary cap rise to \$95.5 million will likely hamper offer sheets, but it's still a tool for GMs to bolster their rosters.

NBC4i / Blue Jackets sign Ivan Provorov to seven-year extension worth \$59.5 million

By David DeGuzman – June 1, 2025

As NHL free agency began Tuesday, the Blue Jackets secured another long-term deal with one of their defensemen, signing Ivan Provorov to a seven-year contract extension worth \$59.5 million.

“Ivan Provorov is the consummate pro and has been an important player during his two seasons in Columbus, so we are thrilled that he will continue to be a Blue Jacket for many years to come,” general manager Don Waddell said in a press release. “He is smart, talented, can play in all situations and has been remarkably consistent and durable throughout his career and we believe his best seasons are ahead of him.”

The 28-year-old recorded 33 points last season, including seven goals and 26 assists, in 82 appearances for the Blue Jackets. Provorov ranked second on the team in ice time and third in blocked shots.

Waddell explained that with an increase in the salary cap and a short list of players available in free agency, a long-term deal made sense for Provorov.

“At his age, the next seven years, I mean this is a guy that plays every night. He’s been very fortunate from an injury standpoint.” Waddell said in a press conference held shortly after the extension was announced. “This is a true warrior. We’re very, very comfortable giving him the term of seven years.”

Over his career with Columbus and the Flyers, the Yaroslavl, Russia, native has 77 goals and 205 assists for 282 points.

“I’m obviously happy to be here for seven years. I think it’s a well compensated contract for what I bring to the table,” Provorov said to reporters. “I think it’s a good contract for both sides.”

The Blue Jackets also announced a flurry of other signings on Tuesday. Center Isac Lundestrom signed a two-year deal worth \$2.6 million after spending the last seven seasons with the Anaheim Ducks. Defenseman Christian Jaros, who hasn’t skated on NHL ice since playing with the Devils in the 2021-22 season, signed a one-year, two-way NHL/AHL contract. And forward Owen Sillinger signed a one-year, two-way NHL/AHL contract, staying with the Blue Jackets organization after spending the last four seasons with the Cleveland Monsters.

The deal with Provorov comes days after Columbus signed fellow defenseman Dante Fabbro to a four-year extension worth \$16.5 million. The 27-year-old joined the Jackets last season after being claimed off waivers from Nashville.

Fabbro told reporters Monday that he feels he’s found a home in Columbus and that he’s happy he’ll be back in the locker room with the Blue Jackets.

“You know for myself, I’ve from Day 1, after the season I had made my intentions clear that I wanted to be back in Columbus. Couldn’t be more happy to be back part of this organization,” Fabbro said. “I think we really have a good thing going on there. So obviously going into next year, I have some more expectations of our team and continue to push to be the best we can.”

The first teammate Fabbro called up after signing the extension was Zach Werenski.

“For myself it’s pretty easy to play with a player like Z, just with how good he is and the way he skates and sees the ice. For myself I obviously want to get the puck in his hands and let him do his thing,”

Fabbro said. "It's been a lot of fun. Obviously I'm looking forward to next year and hitting the ground running."

The Hockey Writers / 5 Prospects to Watch at the Blue Jackets Development Camp

By Matthew Buhrmann – July 2, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets will host their 2025 Development Camp from July 2 to July 5 at the OhioHealth Ice Haus in Columbus. The camp will have a good mix of recent draft picks and invitees looking to make an impression as future free agents.

On-ice sessions start Wednesday, July 2, and the camp closes out Saturday, July 5, with the Prospects Game at 9:30 AM that day.

Here are my five prospects to pay attention to at this year's camp:

Jackson Smith, LD – Penn State University (NCAA)

Jackson Smith is one of the best defensemen in the 2025 Draft class and is now part of a high-end defensive prospect group alongside Luca Marrelli, after Columbus picked him 14th overall last week. He had 11 goals and 43 assists for 54 points in 68 games with the Western Hockey League's (WHL) Tri-City Americans, then added a goal and two assists in five playoff games. He also played a big role for Team Canada at the U18 Worlds, scoring four goals and an assist in seven games with a plus-7 rating, helping them win gold.

Smith's transition game is elite, as he controls exits and entries with ease and makes smart, timely decisions. He's not flashy, but he supports the attack well and rarely forces plays. He's heading to Penn State this fall, which is a great fit development-wise. With Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan, Michigan State, and Notre Dame all nearby, the staff will have plenty of chances to track his progress in the Big Ten.

This was my ideal pick for Columbus at No. 14, and I'm pumped to see how he stacks up against the rest of the prospects on Saturday.

Pyotr Andreyanov, G – Krasnaya Armiya Moskva (MHL)

Andreyanov was a surprise first-round pick at No. 20, as most had him projected in the second or third round, but NHL Central Scouting had him ranked No. 1 among international goalies. He didn't get any Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) time last season but was lights out in the MHL: 23-6-6 record, 1.75 goals-against average (GAA), .942 save percentage (SV%), and three shutouts in 37 games. He later finished six playoff games with a 2.36 GAA, .929 SV%, and another shutout.

Andreyanov is under contract in Russia for three to four more years, so this is a long-term play. Still, I'm curious to see how he handles North American shooters in the prospects game, as it's a good chance for the staff to get a look and start building a plan. He's got a technical, composed style and reminds some of a young Sergei Bobrovsky. If he pans out, this could be a sneaky-good pick.

Cayden Lindstrom, C – Michigan State University (NCAA)

Cayden Lindstrom missed the entire 2024–25 regular season with a back injury but returned for the playoffs, where he had two goals and two assists in four games for the WHL Medicine Hat Tigers.

After the season, he committed to Michigan State for the 2025–26 season and remains unsigned with the team. I'd imagine if he develops at the rate Columbus is hoping for, we'd see him earn an entry-level contract in a year or so.

Don Waddell chose him as the fourth overall pick in the 2024 Draft, his first pick as the general manager, and it's easy to see why. Lindstrom's a 6-foot-4, powerful center with a heavy shot and strong puck protection. Michigan State is a great spot for his development. The lighter NCAA schedule gives him time to build back up physically while facing legit competition. He's got top-six upside if he can stay healthy.

I am very intrigued to see how he does in this week's camp, especially coming off of his injury.

Luca Pinelli, C – Ottawa 67's (OHL)

Luca Pinelli will likely start the 2025–26 season with the Cleveland Monsters after joining them for the 2025 American Hockey League (AHL) Playoffs. He had a strong final Ontario Hockey League (OHL) campaign with the Ottawa 67's, putting up 37 goals and 34 assists for 71 points in 52 games. He also represented Canada at the World Juniors, notching two points in five games. In his brief AHL stint, he added two assists in three regular-season games and followed that with two goals and two assists in six playoff games.

He's a fourth-round steal from the 2023 NHL Draft who's been outperforming his draft slot ever since. The big question now is whether he can transition to the pro game. The OHL and AHL are obviously two very different animals, especially defensively. He's got slick hands and a heavy, accurate wrister, but we'll see how it holds up against tougher matchups moving forward.

We can get a little bit of a better look at his junior-to-pro transition during this upcoming weekend's prospects game.

Lucca Marrelli, RD – Oshawa Generals (OHL)

Marrelli is signed through 2027–28 and is expected to head to Cleveland this season. He had a breakout year with the OHL's Oshawa Generals, posting 19 goals and 55 assists for 74 points in 67 games, then adding a historic 36 points in 21 playoff games. He's a mobile, right-shot defenseman with good size and a knack for jumping into the play without giving up odd-man rushes.

Having him and Smith in the pipeline gives the Blue Jackets two reliable, two-way defensemen with NHL upside. I'm excited to see how Marrelli handles the pace and pressure this week, especially offensively. He was a rock for Oshawa in the playoffs, now let's see how he stacks up against the rest of the prospects in Columbus.

I'm really excited about what the Blue Jackets are building. This development camp is loaded with talent, and it's just a glimpse of what's ahead. In my opinion, Columbus has one of the best prospect pools in the NHL right now.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Betting Big on Themselves in 2025-26

By Mark Scheig – July 2, 2025

When the 2024-25 season ended for the Columbus Blue Jackets, the message from everyone inside the locker room was they fell short of their goal. Although they had a good season that saw them in the running for the playoffs until Game 82, it wasn't good enough.

No one was happy. With that in mind, the thought was some significant changes would come to the roster to help get over the hump and into the playoffs.

Most everyone pointed to the defense and goaltending as the key areas where change was needed. GM Don Waddell agreed with the assessment at exit interviews saying that was a fair statement. He reiterated they're keeping tabs on the D-market to see if there was an opportunity to improve.

The Blue Jackets tried a few things. They fell short on Noah Dobson. Rasmus Andersson reportedly wasn't ready to talk about an extension. With potential upgrades all falling through, it left Waddell no choice but to circle back to the players he knew best.

Dante Fabbro signed a four-year extension. Ivan Provorov signed a big seven-year extension. Suddenly, the blue line was getting the band back together again.

But wait. Wasn't there supposed to be changes in that area? The goals against was clearly an issue all season. A game or two in the other direction and the Blue Jackets make the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

In the end through the first day of NHL Free Agency, the Blue Jackets made one thing clear in their approach in bringing back their own. While there were some changes to the forward ranks, the team is making a big bet on themselves in 2025-26. They believe in what they have.

A Special Group

The message coming from the Blue Jackets this week from Waddell and the players who signed extensions was they have a special group in the locker room. There is a confidence that they can get over the top.

Waddell's approach has remained the same since he's been a manager in the league. He doesn't make change just for the sake of change. He realizes how tight a group these Blue Jackets are. His early approach signals a belief in what they could become.

"I always say you don't make changes for the sake of making change. You make change to try to make your hockey team better," Waddell said on Tuesday. "We felt we did that with a few changes we made. Anytime guys can be together, especially this group. This is a special group, obviously. Everything that happened last year and how they stuck together and how they are moving at the end of the year and moving forward. I think trying to keep the nucleus together was important."

"It doesn't mean we don't want to explore. We always got to see what's out there to see if we can make our team better. But at the end of the day, this group here, we felt very comfortable moving forward with."

Provorov made his intentions clear. He wanted to remain a Blue Jacket. While he admitted things got stressful in the days leading up to the contract, he always felt comfortable with the Blue Jackets.

For Provorov, it starts with his teammates.

"I think starting from the locker room, I think it's a great group of guys," Provorov said. "Everyone gets along. It's a great coaching staff. I think we took a tremendous stride last year...I think it's a great city with a great fanbase. Overall, it's great living, easy, peaceful, great place to raise a family."

"I think we've taken tremendous strides in the past two years. Even from the start of last season, I think we got better and better as the season went on. There are some times where there are downs and there are ups, but I think our team managed those a lot better than we did two years ago. I think we're able to learn how to win and how to put winning streaks together. I think our whole team is pretty young. Our core group is late 20s, early 30s. I think overall every player on this team took strides in getting better and I think that's exciting. I think if we're able to put our best team game forward, I think we can win a lot of games and hopefully win a championship."

Provorov took things a step further with having another year with mostly the same players on the blue line. He says everyone is hungry for more.

"I think missing (Erik Gudbranson) most of the season. I think it just overall helps us having him back," Provorov said. "I think just another season together as a D-core will be helpful. Another year in the same system will be helpful. Overall, I think this team is hungry to get better. I think overall having everyone that was there last year come back I think is a great thing for this team and I think we can take massive strides in the defensive aspect of the game."

Like Provorov, Fabbro made his intentions clear early on in the process. He wanted to return to the Blue Jackets. He too believes in where the team is going.

"I couldn't be more happy to be back a part of this organization and back in that locker room with all those guys," Fabbro said. "I think we really have a good thing going on there. So going into next year, (we) have some more expectations of our team and continue to push to be the best we can...I think in and throughout the lineup, you see how dangerous we can be when we're playing really well and playing together."

Perhaps one of the happiest Blue Jackets to see Fabbro back was Zach Werenski. Fabbro made it a point to immediately text both Werenski and Boone Jenner when the contract was signed to let them know he was staying.

"(Werenski) was obviously happy to see me come back," Fabbro said. "I think the last text was, 'Let's take a step next year and continue to build this thing.' It felt great, and he couldn't be more right...I've told people this lots of times. It was probably the best thing that's ever happened to me (joining the Blue Jackets.)"

New Guys Eager to Help

The Blue Jackets aren't running it back exactly as they did in 2024-25. They completed a trade with the Colorado Avalanche to acquire Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood.

Each see where the team is trying to go. They are eager to help out in any way they can.

"I've been a fan of them from afar, just knowing that these guys are going to be a team to reckon with as we go on here," Coyle said. "Being able to join a team like that, it's an exciting thing...This team has been up and coming for a few years now. They're right on the cusp, and I want to come in and just try to help out with that. That's all. Bring my game and ease into this team and see what we can accomplish."

Wood says he is feeling better health wise after dealing with back issues last season. He said he needed stem-cell treatments. But he is ready to contribute now.

“They’ve made huge strides over the past few years here,” Wood said. “For them to view me as a player that can help them try to be a playoff team consistently, that’s what I want to do and I can’t wait to help them.”

Betting on Themselves

The Blue Jackets are talking the talk when it comes to their belief in themselves. Now they must walk the walk to show that belief in their actions.

Why do they hold this kind of belief in themselves? They got within two points of making the playoffs while missing key players at different points in the year. Their young players took massive strides.

While the goals against was a massive problem, it got better late in the season to keep them in the playoff hunt. In net, the Blue Jackets are set to run Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves as their 1-2. Daniil Tarasov was traded to the Florida Panthers.

The Blue Jackets are betting on Merzlikins and Greaves to stabilize the net together. The team is betting on the defense to continue to build what they started last season. They’re betting that the forwards along with the new additions will produce enough to generate enough wins.

Circling back to Provorov and Fabbro is a big bet by the Blue Jackets on themselves. In a bone-dry market with very few options available, this is what the team had to do.

Whether it’s the right call or not remains to be seen and will be fascinating to watch. But the one thing we cannot question is this. These Blue Jackets believe in each other and believe they are capable of big things.

The time has come for them to prove it now.

The Athletic / As NHL free agency opens, Blue Jackets make news for departures, not additions

By Aaron Portzline – July 2, 2025

When the offseason started, the Columbus Blue Jackets highlighted three or four significant positions on the ice they wanted to upgrade. Optimism abounded for a club that outperformed expectations and missed the playoffs by one win.

This summer held the hope of being transformative. At the start, the Blue Jackets were young and promising. After they cashed in their chips — their two first-round picks and their abundant salary cap space — the Jackets would be armed and dangerous.

It hasn't worked out that way, and that came into a new focus at the start of the league's free-agent sell-off on Tuesday. If the Blue Jackets made news in free agency, it was for what they let leave Nationwide Arena, not what they managed to bring into the fold.

Columbus native Sean Kuraly, who spent four years with the Blue Jackets, signed a two-year, \$3.7 million contract with the Boston Bruins, where his career began. Justin Danforth signed a two-year, \$3.6 million contract with the Buffalo Sabres, and James van Riemsdyk, who had 16 goals last season, signed a one-year, \$1 million deal with the Detroit Red Wings.

General manager Don Waddell made one preemptive move ahead of those departures, which he believes brought upgrades. Last Friday, he acquired forwards Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood in a trade with the Colorado Avalanche. He also made a signing on Tuesday when it was clear that Danforth, who would have been the fourth-line center, would depart for upstate New York.

Isac Lundestrom, who spent six seasons with the Anaheim Ducks, signed a two-year, \$2.6 million contract.

Waddell, who had a full year's honeymoon since his hiring last summer, was asked to explain how the Blue Jackets of July 1 are an improved version of the club that won six straight games and walked off the ice to a standing ovation in mid-April.

He highlighted three areas:

- The young players, with the help of some impressive veterans, are going to improve, take on bigger roles and play at a higher level.
- The structure and expectations, instituted by coach Dean Evason last season, have now taken root in the dressing room.
- The injury wave that crushed the Blue Jackets last season — Boone Jenner, Sean Monahan, Erik Gudbranson, and others missed extended time — can't possibly repeat itself in 2025-26, right? (Don't answer that, longtime Jackets fans.)

That's always been part of the plan, though.

By now, though, in an ideal summer, the Blue Jackets would have added a top-six scoring winger, a right-side defenseman to play in their top four, a right-shot center to help them with faceoffs, and — perhaps, though never stated publicly — a new starting goaltender.

It left Waddell on Tuesday to pledge his allegiance to a roster whose only significant change is on the third and fourth forward lines.

“This is a special group,” Waddell said. “Everything that happened last year, how they stuck together and how they finished the season ... we felt trying to keep the nucleus together was important. It doesn’t mean we don’t explore. We always have to look to see what’s out there to see if we can make our team better.”

The boldest example of that was with defenseman Ivan Provorov, who the Blue Jackets tried to replace with the aforementioned right-side defenseman.

When it became clear to Waddell that the trade market was not going to provide an upgrade, he circled back with little time to spare to get Provorov signed. By then, the leverage was firmly in Provorov’s camp, and he benefitted tremendously.

The seven-year, \$59.5 million contract (\$8.5 million salary cap hit) that Provorov agreed to late Monday was finalized just before noon on Tuesday, when the markets opened. Provorov will make \$9 million this season, \$8.5 million in years two through six, and \$8 million in the seventh year (2031-32).

A total of \$9.5 million will be paid via signing bonuses in the first six years of the contract. Also, there’s a no-move clause in the first two years of the deal, and a modified no-trade clause in the final five.

It made for a potentially awkward scene on Tuesday when Provorov and Waddell held back-to-back press conferences in Nationwide Arena.

“They knew I wanted to stay,” Provorov said. “My understanding is they wanted to keep me. It’s not a secret that they, obviously, explored and looked at other options.

“Definitely it was a stressful week. For a little bit, I definitely did not know if I was coming back or not. Obviously, the want from me was to stay and re-sign here, and I’m glad we were able to come to an agreement.”

Waddell was reluctant to go long-term with Provorov before the trade deadline last March, but only because NHL GMs like the flexibility of shorter contracts. There is no concern, Waddell said, in giving Provorov such a long term — the NHL max is eight years — because of his reliability.

Provorov has never missed a game in two years with the Blue Jackets. In fact, he’s never missed a game in his 696-game career due to injury. He was forced out of the lineup due to a positive COVID-19 test when he played in Philadelphia.

“This is a guy who plays every night,” Waddell said. “I’ve told this story many times. We were up in Canada (on Dec. 6 in Vancouver) when he dislocated his thumb. I asked him how long he’s going to be out, and he looked at me and said, ‘Don, I broke my thumb, not my foot.’

“This is true warrior, and we’re very comfortable going with the term of seven years.”

Lundestrom, 25, was a first-round pick (No. 23 overall) of the Ducks in 2018. He looked the part in his first full NHL season (2021-22), too, totaling 16-13-29 in 80 games. He’s played in a mostly fourth-line capacity in Anaheim the past three seasons.

The Blue Jackets also made a pair of signings designed to help AHL Cleveland and, if necessary, provide depth in Columbus. Defenseman Christian Jaros and forward Owen Sillinger signed one-year, two-way deals. Jaros, who has played briefly in the NHL with Ottawa, San Jose and New Jersey, spent the past three seasons in Russia’s KHL.

Waddell said he’s looking for a depth goaltender, too, one could fill a No. 2 or No. 3 role, similar to Jet Greaves’ role last season. Ideally, he’d like a goaltender who doesn’t need to clear waivers.

But as for the top remaining free agents? Don't expect the Blue Jackets to be active, Waddell said. No, they aren't going to sign Nikolaj Ehlers, the top free agent forward still on the board.

"Where we're at right now, we're comfortable with our group," Waddell said. "But it's my job to continue to explore throughout the summer and see if we can make us better."

Meanwhile, defenseman Jordan Harris, who became a free agent on Monday when the Blue Jackets declined to extend a qualifying offer, signed a one-year, \$835,000 contract with the Boston Bruins.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets circle back to Ivan Provorov after summer makeover stagnates

By Aaron Portzline – June 30, 2025

This was supposed to be the Columbus Blue Jackets' latest summer of significant change, with a laundry list of upgrades and expenditures that general manager Don Waddell wanted to pursue to help his promising, young roster move forward.

Instead, it's been the summer of stagnation.

Waddell did acquire two significant players to help the Blue Jackets' third and fourth forward lines — Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood were added in a trade with Colorado — but the biggest areas that needed help were from the red line back: defense and goaltending.

The defense, barring an out-of-nowhere blockbuster, will remain almost entirely unchanged. On Sunday, Dante Fabbro signed a four-year, \$16.5 million contract (\$4.125 million salary cap) to return to his spot next to Zach Werenski on the top pair.

As of late Monday, Waddell and Mark Gandler, the agent for defenseman Ivan Provorov, were putting the finishing touches on a seven-year, \$59.5 million contract (\$8.5 million AAV) that would extend Provorov through the 2031-32 season, the most far-reaching contract on the roster.

Meanwhile, the likelihood that struggling goaltender Elvis Merzlikins will remain with the Blue Jackets increased exponentially when the NHL's 10-day buyout window closed without Merzlikins on the waiver wire.

Barring an unlikely trade of the 31-year-old Latvian, the fact that he's still on the roster suggests strongly that Merzlikins and Jet Greaves — in some order — will be the Blue Jackets' 1-2 punch next season.

In a normal year, you might hold off on assuming that the Blue Jackets, or any other club, would be finished with their offseason makeover, because Tuesday is the start of NHL free agency. And, with the salary cap going up, most clubs have money to spend for the first time in five seasons.

But that money was largely used by teams to re-sign their own players (as the Blue Jackets ended up doing with Provorov and Fabbro). It's hard to remember a free-agent pool as shallow as the one that will become available at noon ET on Tuesday.

Waddell lamented the scarcity of players available after Friday's first round of the NHL Draft, the first sign that this summer might not go as the Blue Jackets had hoped. The plan, Waddell indicated, was to use the Jackets' two first-round picks (Nos. 14 and 20) to help bring immediate help.

Most years, that's possible at the draft. This year? Not so much. The only picks-for-player(s) trade involving first-round picks was struck by Montreal and the New York Islanders, when defenseman Noah Dobson was sent to the Canadiens in exchange for Montreal's No. 16 and No. 17 pick.

That trade is a good example of the difficulty Waddell had making deals, and it wasn't because of any inaction on his part.

Waddell was deeply involved in trade talks with Islanders new GM Mathieu Darche, but he deemed the asking price to be too high. The request, reportedly, was not only the Blue Jackets' two first-round picks, but also towering top-six forward Dmitri Voronkov and a prospect.

Once Waddell recognized that the trade market wasn't going to provide a right-side, top-four defender, and when it became clear that free agency wasn't going to involve that caliber of player, either, he circled back to two of his most reliable defenders from last season.

In the process, Provorov — and to a lesser extent Fabbro — gained enormous leverage in the negotiations. The Blue Jackets were reluctant to go long-term with Provorov, both before last season's trade deadline and earlier this season when they tried to move along with a deal, but they had no choice when the market fizzled.

The Blue Jackets made a series of other decisions on Monday, too.

The Blue Jackets are letting UFA forwards Sean Kuraly, Christian Fischer and Luke Kunin, and defenseman Jack Johnson head to free agency. It appears forwards James van Riemsdyk and Justin Danforth will go to the market, too, barring a last-minute contract on Tuesday morning.

They extended qualifying offers to three restricted free agents — defenseman Daemon Hunt and Voronkov — protecting their rights to the players. Hunt and Voronkov have arbitration rights that must be exercised in the coming days. Forward Mykael Pyyhtiä was given his qualifying offer in May so that he could obtain insurance to play for Finland in the IIHF World Championships.

Defenseman Jordan Harris, a restricted free agent, was not extended a qualifying offer that would have guaranteed him a one-way contract for next season. That makes him an unrestricted free agent on Tuesday, free to sign with any other club.

Harris, who was acquired from Montreal last August in the trade that sent Patrik Laine to the Canadiens, played in only 33 games for the Blue Jackets and was a healthy scratch for long stretches of the season.

The Blue Jackets also declined to extend qualifying offers to minor-league defensemen Cole Clayton, Samuel Knazko and Ole-Julian Bjorgvik-Holm.

Waddell previously mentioned a desire to add a top-six forward, and there are a few available on the free-agent market. Winnipeg's Nikolaj Ehlers tops the lists, along with Vancouver's Brock Boeser and Dallas' Mikael Granlund.

In an interview early Monday on the Blue Jackets' flagship station, WBNS-FM, Waddell described his approach to free-agent forwards as "adding around the edges." He did that late last summer, adding van Riemsdyk, Zach Aston Reese and others.

There could be surprises, of course. The Jackets could jump in and land a prominent player (we've seen that before). A free-agent signing elsewhere in the league could create a roster glut or a salary-cap problem that could make a player expendable. An out-of-nowhere call from another GM could delight Waddell with a trade offer.

But as it stands, the Blue Jackets — for now — will have to hope that their young talent continues to take big steps forward as they did last season, that Greaves is ready to be a strong NHL goaltender capable of carrying a load, and that newcomers Coyle and Wood are able to help the club's third and fourth lines make more of an impact.

The Athletic / NHL free agency: The 9 best players still available on the market on Day 2

By Harman Dayal – July 2, 2025

July 1 didn't have as many fireworks as we're accustomed to. There were plenty of motivated buyers, but an already-weak crop of unrestricted free agents was further thinned out by the flurry of extensions that happened the previous day.

Most of the true difference-makers are off the board, but there are still some intriguing names available. Expectations just have to be tempered — these aren't top-six players (except Nikolaj Ehlers) or top-four defenders who will be core pieces; they're solid supporting cast and depth options.

Here are nine of the most attractive targets left.

Nikolaj Ehlers

Nikolaj Ehlers' tantalizing, game-breaking offensive skill set is highly coveted in an offseason where it's been very tricky for teams to find high-end top-six forwards.

The 29-year-old left winger is incredibly fast, skilled and creative. He's a dynamic puck transporter capable of driving dangerous zone entries and creating rush scoring chances at will. Ehlers can flat-out break games wide open with his pace and finesse.

Ehlers has consistently produced in the 25-goal, 60-65 point range, but his underutilization in Winnipeg has suppressed his production. He ranks 15th best among all NHL players for five-on-five points produced per hour over the last three seasons, yet he's inexplicably averaged less than 16 minutes per game in each of those years. Ehlers only averaged 18 minutes per game for one season in his career, which was 2021-22, when he exploded for 28 goals and 55 points in 62 games (a 72-point pace).

In other words, deploy Ehlers like the bona fide first-line-caliber player he is, and there's a good chance you're looking at a 30-goal, 70-point player who can drive play on his own.

The two concerns surrounding Ehlers are his durability and his mediocre playoff track record. However, he checks every other box and would be a slam-dunk fit for any team searching to bolster its offensive attack.

Pius Suter

I'm not sure media and fans appreciate quite how valuable a player Pius Suter is. It's easy to gloss over him because he's a tad undersized at 5-foot-11, has below-average foot speed and doesn't boast flashy, dynamic offensive tools. Suter's two-way IQ, however, is special, and he'll be a coach's dream as one of the most versatile players in the league.

The 29-year-old Swiss forward delivers terrific defensive results, can easily score 15-20 goals (he scored 25 this year but benefited from a bit of an inflated shooting percentage) and is an excellent penalty killer. He thrived as a middle-six center in Vancouver, but also has high enough offensive intelligence to complement star players on the wing. In 2023-24, for example, he played as a top-line winger with J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser. Suter was by far the best third-wheel option on that line, with Miller and Boeser's underlying numbers improving significantly when sharing the ice with him.

Dmitry Orlov

For years, Dmitry Orlov has been able to singlehandedly drive a second pair's success with his puck-moving and well-rounded two-way skill set. He was still a steady second-pair defenseman for most of the season in Carolina, but he profiles as more of a No. 4/5 moving forward.

Orlov's play significantly deteriorated in the playoffs, with the Canes controlling only 46.4 percent of expected goals and 41 percent of actual goals during his five-on-five shifts in the postseason. It's also worth noting that Carolina has a favorable environment where defensemen often perform better than their actual talent level. Consider how challenging it was for Brady Skjei to transition from Carolina to Nashville, for example.

Orlov is still a very useful defenseman, but at 33, he needs to be insulated with a quality partner and can't be thrown to the wolves with overwhelmingly difficult matchups and defensive assignments.

Jack Roslovic

Jack Roslovic is a dynamic but occasionally frustrating offense-first player.

The 28-year-old, who's primarily a winger but can also play center, has the flashy skating, playmaking IQ and high-level skill to drive dangerous zone entries and scoring chances. He's coming off a 22-goal season in Carolina, is an efficient producer of even-strength offense, and even has stretches where he flashes top-six potential. The problem is those heaters are contrasted with frustrating stretches of invisibility, turnovers and occasional defensive lapses. And that's especially problematic because he doesn't bring much to the table beyond his offensive toolkit.

On the right team, in a sheltered scoring role, Roslovic could provide dynamic secondary offense.

Brent Burns

At 40, Brent Burns obviously isn't the elite player he once was. His offensive impact in particular has slowed down, as he scored only 29 points in 82 games, representing a precipitous drop-off compared to the last two years.

That said, Burns still held his own, averaging 21 minutes on the Hurricanes' top pair this past season. Burns' usage will probably need to be lightened elsewhere as he benefited from playing with Jaccob Slavin and in the Hurricanes' insulated environment, but he can still offer quality minutes at even strength and on the penalty kill.

Victor Olofsson

Victor Olofsson's rocket of a shot makes him a dangerous scorer, especially for a team that needs power-play help. The 29-year-old winger has scored 20 goals three times in his career and is coming off a respectable year in Vegas, where he scored 15 goals and 29 points in 56 games. He's a one-dimensional player and can be inconsistent defensively, so fit is important — he needs to go somewhere where he can be sheltered at even strength and/or insulated by quality defensive linemates.

Anthony Beauvillier

Anthony Beauvillier is a solid bottom-six winger who can play up the lineup in a pinch. The 28-year-old left winger is a speedy skater and is reliable defensively. He can go invisible for long stretches, especially offensively, but he's scored at least 15 goals six times in his career. Beauvillier also has a solid playoff track record, which continued during this year's postseason, where he chipped in with six points in 10 games.

Matt Grzelcyk

Any team looking for a third-pair, left-side puck mover who can also boost a power-play should kick the tires on Matt Grzelcyk. The undersized 31-year-old made some loud mistakes and struggled defensively in Pittsburgh, but it was in a role where he was averaging more than 20 minutes per night. If you shelter his matchups and minutes, he'll likely perform far better at five-on-five. If you can combine that with the 40 points he registered this season, you'll have a mighty useful player.

Mason Appleton

So far on this list, we've covered a few third-line caliber wingers who can drive offense but are a bit one-dimensional and can't always be trusted defensively. Mason Appleton, on the other hand, represents more of your prototypical third-line grinder. He can shine defensively in a checking role, has an above-average 6-foot-2 frame and can win puck battles, especially on the forecheck.

The 29-year-old is coming off a down year offensively (10 goals and 22 points in 71 games), but he scored 14 goals and 36 points in 2023-24. Appleton is a safe, high-floor third-line winger.

The Athletic / NHL free agency winners and losers: Panthers do it again, good day for D, bad day for Kings

By Shayna Goldman – July 1, 2025

It's hard to stay at the top, especially in a salary cap world. Thirty-one other teams all want a piece of the reigning Stanley Cup champs. Sometimes, instead of finding new ways to emulate success, teams want to outright replicate it by signing players with championship experience, no matter the cost.

Most would have handed Sam Bennett a blank check. Aaron Ekblad, one of the few top-four right-handed defenders, could have signed to be a number one elsewhere. And anyone would have welcomed Brad Marchand's Rat King energy.

But the Panthers have created something special in Sunrise. A few extensions (and a couple of low-key signings) later, Florida is looking to start a dynasty. That makes them one of the biggest winners to start free agency.

Winners

Florida Panthers

It seemed like the Panthers were going to have to pick and choose which of their big-name free agents to extend. Instead, all three are sticking around long-term. The Ekblad contract is incredibly team-friendly; he projects to be worth his cap hit in at least seven of eight seasons. The Bennett deal is a bit of an overpayment based on his regular-season play, but there's no question that he is an absolute dawg in the playoffs, which has been pivotal to the team's success. And Marchand couldn't have been a better fit in Florida, showing exactly what he has left in the tank.

Taxes *can* be a factor in the contract process. But it's not everything. Players are more willing to take a hometown discount when the team creates a winning environment everyone wants to be a part of. Pair that with management's strategy of interchanging depth roles with inexpensive contracts (from Oliver Ekman-Larsson on the third pair to Nate Schmidt last year and now Jeff Petry) and everything is staying sunny in Florida.

Mitch Marner

It doesn't matter how well Marner played for stretches of the playoffs. The negatives outweighed the positives, from a disastrous Game 5 performance against the Panthers that pushed the Leafs to the brink of elimination, to a disappointing Game 7.

But now, the good, the bad and the ugly of his Maple Leafs tenure are behind Marner. It's the start of a new era in Vegas.

The Golden Knights are a perfect landing spot for Marner. The team craved help on the wings, and they found someone with elite playmaking ability and Selke-caliber defense. The test now is whether or not he can bring that regular-season energy to the playoffs.

The pressure is still there to perform, it's just different now. There is no more discussion on what his next contract will look like, or whether he's just in it for the money. Marner didn't choose to sign for \$14 million with a bottom-feeder. He signed for \$12 million — the same as Mikko Rantanen — to stay in the contender's circle. It's still superstar money, without the pressure of being the highest-paid winger in the league.

And as cutthroat and competitive as Vegas' front office is, it's a completely different environment than the Toronto market. And that should help Marner settle in and play to his strengths, instead of worrying about all of the constant noise around him.

With Marner signing early, it makes Nikolaj Ehlers the best winger on the market — and now *he* is one of the big winners of the day. There are a lot of teams in need of someone with his offensive creativity, so now he will have his pick of the best situation and contract.

Free-agent defensemen

It's a good year to be a blueliner.

The market was already thin heading into the offseason. Most big-name pending UFAs extended early, from Shea Theodore, Victor Hedman and Jaccob Slavin, to Esa Lindell, Marcus Pettersson, Jake McCabe and Jakob Chychrun. That made every remaining top-four defenseman that much more valuable.

While the Panthers extended Ekblad with a team-friendly deal, the Blue Jackets signed Ivan Provorov to a premium at \$8.5 million a year for the next seven years, when his market value is closer to \$3.8 million over that span. Then, a little after the market opened today, Vladislav Gavrikov cashed in with a seven-year, \$49 million contract that looks like a fit for the Rangers.

Pricey defensive contracts went to the restricted free agent class too, with Noah Dobson (eight years, \$9.5 million AAV), Alexander Romanov (eight years, \$6.25 million AAV), Evan Bouchard (four years, \$10.5 million AAV), and Martin Fehervary (seven years, \$6 million AAV). Each contract carries an element of risk and upside.

The defensive market is always interesting, and the rising cap added another level of intrigue. The signings over the last week have recalibrated the market, which should have a ripple effect for a 2026 class that includes Rasmus Andersson, Jake Walman and Mario Ferraro, along with RFAs Thomas Harley and Jackson LaCombe.

Montreal Canadiens

Montreal had taken a lower-key approach throughout this retooling process. Instead of taking big swings, management prioritized drafting and developing a core and finding reclamation projects for support.

But after last year's post-4 Nations turnaround and push to the playoffs, the Canadiens are making moves.

Sometimes, a playoff appearance can give a team the wrong idea about its trajectory. It can inspire big-name free agent signings to accelerate the process, instead of finding players whose timelines actually align with the team's. That isn't the case in Montreal.

The Canadiens have taken two measured swings: Noah Dobson and Zachary Bolduc. The team is in the right position to start flipping future assets for players that will help now and in the long run. Dobson is exactly that: a difference-maker from the back end. And Bolduc is a savvy addition to the middle-six; he really found his footing in the Blues' post-4 Nations run with 13 goals and 18 points in 26 games.

Veterans signing multi-year deals

It started with the Yanni Gourde extension in Tampa Bay early in June. A six-year deal for a 33-year-old may seem odd, but there's a method to the madness. That allowed the Lightning to sign him for \$14 million, but keep the cap hit down to \$2.3 million. It doesn't matter what happens in those later years, because the Lightning's window will be closed by then. And if he ends up retiring early, so be it.

It's a trend that a handful of other teams are taking note of. At 34, John Tavares will earn another \$17.5 million, split across four years. That lowers his cap hit from \$11 million last year down to \$4.4 million, which is incredibly team-friendly for a second-line center. The same applies to Matt Duchene's four-year deal in Dallas; a \$4.5 million contract should help the Stars navigate their own cap crunch.

Jake Allen could have commanded more money upfront on a shorter-term deal if he had reached the market. Instead, his \$9 million extension is spread out over the next five years for a \$1.8 million AAV.

The key with these contracts is that they were all signed *before* the players turned 35. So when (or if) they retire before the conclusion of the deal, it won't count against the cap.

That isn't the case in Florida, with Brad Marchand's six-year extension that takes him to 43 years old. But if that's what it takes to keep his cap hit to \$5.25 million, so the Panthers can maintain cap flexibility in this window of contention, it's worth it.

Losers

Basement-dwelling teams

Usually, teams at the bottom of the standings can leverage cap space to spend big in free agency. And while stars usually don't bite, supporting players do.

The Sharks signed Tyler Toffoli and Alex Wennberg last year. Tyler Bertuzzi and Teuvo Teravainen joined the Blackhawks. Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson signed in Seattle.

This year, despite so many rising costs in free agency, it has rarely been the case. There have only been a few exceptions, like Christian Dvorak in Philadelphia, Mikael Granlund in Anaheim and John Klingberg in San Jose.

Those signings can be pretty important for rebuilding teams. It's a way to ensure their up-and-coming stars have actual NHL-caliber talent around them for support. It's a way to add eventual trade assets that can be moved at future trade deadlines. And it's a way to help reach the cap floor around entry-level and inexpensive contracts.

The market isn't closed just yet. There are UFAs to sign, RFAs to target with offer sheets, and trade options for contenders against the cap. But it's a different feeling from last summer, when more players were willing to sign for more, even if it meant playing meaningless hockey for a time.

Teams looking for help in net

The goalie market was incredibly weak this year. Igor Shesterkin, Linus Ullmark, Jake Oettinger, Joey Daccord, Mackenzie Blackwood, Logan Thompson, Frederik Andersen, Adin Hill, Juuse Saros and Karel Vejmelka all extended early. That took essentially every single elite goalie, bona fide starter and 1A off the market.

The Allen extension took another name out of the mix. With David Rittich, Dan Vladar, Alex Lyon and Anton Forsberg all finding new landing spots, it leaves teams with a bleak list of free agent options that includes Ilya Samsonov, Alexandar Georgiev, Spencer Martin and James Reimer.

With the Red Wings freeing John Gibson from Anaheim and the Canucks extending Thatcher Demko to a pricey short-term deal, the trade market isn't booming, either.

So the teams that need help in net, like the Oilers, are going to have to get creative this summer because a short list of options is almost nonexistent now.

Boston Bruins

Between extending Morgan Geekie and Mason Lohrei to fair contracts, and buying low on Viktor Arvidsson, the Bruins got off to a solid start this offseason.

Until the Tanner Jeannot contract.

The Bruins aren't the first team to overvalue Jeannot. Just think back to 2023 when the Lightning traded a first, a second, a third, a fourth, and a fifth for the winger.

The difference now is that Jeannot isn't one year removed from an encouraging 24-goal campaign, where he proved to be a combination of secondary scoring and physicality. As misguided as that was in terms of acquisition cost, the player fit made some sense back then.

But over the last three seasons, it's become abundantly clear that Jeannot's 2021-22 scoring was just a flash in the pan. He couldn't replicate it in Nashville, Tampa Bay or Los Angeles. Instead, he has settled into a bottom-six role and doesn't thread the needle much on either end of the ice.

According to Evolving-Hockey's model, he was projected to sign a four-year deal worth \$2.7 million a year, on average. His market value is even lower, at \$800,000.

Instead, the Bruins signed him for five years, with a \$3.4 million cap hit.

Boston may be in a position to bet on reclamation projects as the team retools back into the playoff picture. But that doesn't mean they should commit five years to someone who doesn't show a lot of potential to be a difference-maker, either.

Los Angeles Kings

There are always missteps and mistakes in the early goings of free agency. But the biggest loser on Day 1 is clear: the Kings.

The Andrei Kuzmenko extension was a promising start to the offseason, considering how well he fit in Los Angeles post-deadline. But on July 1, management made not one but two questionable defensive signings: Cody Ceci (four years, \$4.5 million AAV) and Brian Dumoulin (three years, \$4 million AAV).

Welcome to the Ken Holland era.

There is value to being a minute-eater who can go up against top competition. That kind of player can help a team maximize the rest of their blue line. Oftentimes, that player's underlying numbers aren't going to be pretty. Ceci's numbers weren't in Dallas last year, and the difficulty of his minutes is a big reason why.

But at the end of the day, it holds a contender back when they trust someone like Ceci to play those minutes in the first place. That was true in Dallas this spring and Edmonton last year. Now, expecting him to do that at 31 years old and beyond is extremely short-sighted.

Dumoulin doesn't look cut out for that role, either. At this point in his career, he should exclusively be playing sheltered minutes on the third pair. Instead, he could be viewed as a lefty to step up in Gavrikov's absence.

Maybe the Kings' structure can help insulate Ceci and Dumoulin. Maybe having Drew Doughty and Mikey Anderson on the top pair will limit their usage to more fitting roles, too. It just doesn't make any sense to get older and slower after getting burned by the Oilers' pace and scoring in each of the last four years.

It doesn't make sense to have three one-dimensional defensemen in the starting six, either, between Joel Edmundson, Ceci and Dumoulin. Just ask the Stars how well that worked for them while Miro Heiskanen was sidelined.

The Kings needed to make bold changes this summer to get past the first round, but management has taken them in the wrong direction so far.

The Athletic / Why was NHL free agency such a dud? What does it mean for the 2026 class?

By James Mirtle – July 1, 2025

When the day came to a close, there were 121 signings spread across the NHL's 32 teams and a total of \$672 million spent in one of the more underwhelming free-agent frenzies in recent memory.

Despite the salary cap jumping 9 percent, and set to skyrocket from \$88 million last season to \$113.5 million by 2027, those numbers were down from the norm. Over the previous four years, the average opening day of NHL free agency saw 140 signings and a total of \$765 million spent, despite the cap sitting stagnant in the low-\$80 million range for years due to the financial impact of the pandemic in 2020.

With teams flush with as much as 16 percent more cap room than those years, they somehow spent roughly 12 percent less on July 1, leaving the free-agent panels on Canadian television debating Olympic rosters and other similar unrelated minutiae.

While a few teams — led by the Kings — were surprisingly aggressive, many clubs sat out the frenzy-less frenzy entirely. Typically capped-out teams like the Flames, Blackhawks, Avalanche, Blue Jackets, Oilers, Wild, Canadiens, Senators and Maple Leafs (among others) added only \$2 million or less to next season's NHL cap sheet throughout the day, as of late Tuesday night.

Part of the problem is there just weren't many high-end targets to aim for, especially once Mitch Marner came off the board in a blockbuster sign-and-trade from Toronto to Vegas the night before. With an eye on how weak the UFA class was shaping up to be over the past few weeks, general managers across the league began scrambling to lock up their existing talent at the last minute, throwing extra dollars at pending UFA and RFA players they had previously been in tough negotiations with.

The defending champion Panthers added to the carnage in re-signing Sam Bennett, Aaron Ekblad and Brad Marchand one after another in the four days leading up to free agency, subtracting three of the top pending UFA talents for a Sun Belt bargain. Some teams that had intended to be far more aggressive, like the Red Wings and Maple Leafs, instead chose to stand down, leaving acres of cap space untouched.

There was frustration evident around the league with how things played out, even if it wasn't entirely unexpected given the rising cap, weak free-agent class and so many teams trying to get better.

"There were people we targeted, and once those guys were gone, we've always said we have a plan and we have to stick to it," Flames GM Craig Conroy said after his team's quiet day, despite owning \$20 million in cap room.

"I know everybody wants to talk about second-line centers," Leafs GM Brad Treliving said of one key unfilled need for his club, which now has a rare surplus of \$6 million cap space entering the offseason. "There's probably, by my count, 27 teams that are looking for them. And so the ones that have them aren't giving them out."

For the most part they weren't giving out scoring wingers, top-four defensemen or starting goalies, either.

Even with some executives opting out of the exercise altogether, the free-agent boards — meager as they were entering July 1 — were decimated throughout the day. The only unrestricted free agents with

30 points this season who remained unsigned going into Day 2 were Nikolaj Ehlers, Pius Suter, Matt Grzelcyk and Jack Roslovic.

Complicating things further was the fact so many teams had a lot to spend, to an extent we probably haven't witnessed in the 20 years of the cap era. Even with second-pair defensemen like Ivan Provorov getting \$8.5 million and depth forwards like Tanner Jeannot signing for \$3.4 million, there's still roughly \$300 million left to spend across the league, an average of more than \$9 million per team.

And that's before injured veterans like Carey Price and Alex Pietrangelo end up on LTIR to free up more room for Montreal and Vegas, respectively, two of just four teams currently over the cap. (The others are Florida and Dallas, two contenders that will have to dump a little salary in the days to come.)

At the other extreme of things, the Sharks have \$34 million in cap room with 19 players signed, putting them \$9.5 million under the league's \$70.6 million salary floor, and the Ducks aren't far behind at \$29 million. In all, 13 clubs have \$10 million or more in open space, despite the fact almost every team has a full complement of 20-odd players signed already.

Some of that excess will go to the 40-odd restricted free agents who have yet to sign, but even their ranks have thinned dramatically over the past week as teams rushed to take the prospect of an offer sheet off the table, rewarding the likes of K'Andre Miller (who was dealt to Carolina on Tuesday), Logan Stankoven, Evan Bouchard, Noah Dobson, Martin Fehervary, Alexander Romanov, Morgan Geekie, Nic Hague, JJ Peterka and Matthew Knies with huge paydays.

The reality is that giving those young players more money and term on their second or third contracts felt far more palatable than the inflated prices for many aging veterans.

Executives we talked to on Tuesday night noted that while there was plenty of extra money to throw around, it simply didn't matter given the value of cap space isn't what it has been in the past.

What will that mean in practice over the months to come? With so many teams unable to meet their needs in free agency this year, expect the trade market to continue to churn throughout the summer and into September when training camps open. With so few teams selling off established players — and only the Penguins seemingly in a traditional teardown — GMs will need to make more hockey deals in order to fill roster voids.

Additional movement could also happen as the contenders get sorted out from the pretenders once the regular season starts. If teams fall out of the playoff race early — by, say, early December — there could be a profitable selloff as the postseason-bound clubs are finally able use their extra cap room by picking over the rosters of GMs throwing in the towel.

The other knock-on effect of this year's ugly UFA buying experience may well be that teams start to get even more aggressive in trying to lock up their talent, draining what looked like it would be an enticing 2026 free-agent pool of much of its intrigue.

It's hard to imagine the teams with potential 2026 UFAs like Jack Eichel, Kirill Kaprizov, Kyle Connor and, yes, Connor McDavid want anything to do with having to try and replace those losses in free agency a year from now. That fear, combined with all the cap room out there, could drive prices for those stars far higher than we've seen to date.

With the majority of the NHL's top players choosing to sign long-term deals to stay where they are, it's become so hard to find superstars in this league that letting one slip away — the way the Leafs did with Marner — feels like it'll be extra punishing going forward.

And days like July 1 are clearly becoming a less vital part of building a contender than ever.

