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October 12-14, 2024**

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## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets fall short against Minnesota Wild: 3 takeaways

**By Brian Hedger- October 12, 2024**

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The whiteboard on the back wall of the visitor's locker room contained three main points for the Blue Jackets on Thursday at Xcel Energy Center.

Written in all capital letters with black marker was the following:

The last one didn't work out for the Blue Jackets or coach Dean Evason in a 3-2 loss to the Minnesota Wild to open the regular season, but they did check off the first two keys. The Blue Jackets hounded pucks, set up shop in the Minnesota zone and forced goalie Filip Gustavsson to make some high-quality saves to keep the Blue Jackets from seizing the lead.

They just couldn't turn it into a win in Evason's inaugural return to face a team that replaced him last year with John Hynes.

"We didn't get the result, which we're not happy with, but we got the effort," Evason said. "We got the work, we got the visual of how we want to play, the reinforcement of how we want to play. We didn't score a couple more goals. We made a couple mistakes for a couple goals (allowed), which happens, but we liked how hard our group played tonight."

Next up is the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday in Denver, where the Blue Jackets will try it again facing a perennial Stanley Cup contender. Here are three takeaways from their season-opening loss:

Columbus Blue Jackets win stat battle, Minnesota Wild win game

One of the largest differences between the youthful Blue Jackets and veteran Wild is the ability to finish scoring chances. Columbus put more shots on net (32-26), established a 60% to 40% edge in 5-on-5 attempted shots and just couldn't beat Gustavsson more than once at even strength.

That's the biggest reason the Blue Jackets are 0-1-0. They made a few costly blunders defensively, but the Jackets' success backchecking and maintaining possession was impressive.

According to Natural Stat Trick, their best forward group was center Sean Monahan's top line, which included Yegor Chinakhov and Kirill Marchenko as wingers. The Blue Jackets finished with a 16-4 edge in 5-on-5 attempts (80%) with those three on the ice plus 90% of shots on goal (9-1) and a 2-0 margin in high-danger scoring chances. They didn't produce a 5-on-5 goal but might generate more goals and points by continuing that kind of dominance.

Chinakhov joined that line because captain Boone Jenner is out with a shoulder injury that required surgery Wednesday.

Kent Johnson's performance ranked among the top reasons for optimism about the Blue Jackets' future. Just like the preseason, when Johnson averaged a point per game, his speed bursts and skating allowed him to chase down pucks, win races to gain possession and hold onto the puck longer.

Johnson was the Jackets' most impressive player Thursday, finishing with two points on a goal that tied it 1-1 in the second plus an assist on Zach Werenski's power play goal late in the third. Johnson bristles whenever it's suggested that he's improved dramatically from this point a year ago, but that's what has happened.

A year ago, under former coach Pascal Vincent, he had a quieter training camp and began the regular season as a healthy scratch. Soon after, he was assigned to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters with a specific list of things to improve. Adding strength and bulk were list items, and Johnson checked off both.

A torn shoulder labrum that ended last season prematurely for Johnson also forced him to work on adding leg strength while rehabbing his upper half. That plus hard work with a strength and skating coach in Vancouver this past summer paid off. Johnson's skating is now a plus rather than an item that winds up on a pro scout's list of drawbacks about a player.

As a result, Johnson's vision, hands and shot are far more noticeable. This is why the Blue Jackets selected Johnson fifth overall in 2021 despite a light, wiry body that required patience to develop.

"His skating ability is just out of this world," Evason said. "He's getting up and down the ice. Very confident. He's playing extremely well."

Zach Werenski's new stick, shot mentality pay off for Columbus Blue Jackets

Werenski finished with game-high marks in shots (seven) and attempted shots (11), including three that were blocked and one that was off target. It paid dividends on a goal to cap a power play and cut the Wild's margin to 3-2 with 2:56 left to play.

Werenski's goal sparked a desperate late push for a tying goal that didn't materialize for the Blue Jackets, who need their top defenseman to keep firing pucks whenever he sees a lane to rip it. Werenski said afterward that he has a renewed urgency to shoot more often plus new stick specs that include a different curve and higher flex number to increase its ability to whip pucks with a higher velocity.

Raising his flex number from 85 to 95 also raises the chances of the stick snapping into two pieces, but Werenski will gladly make that tradeoff if his new stick nets more goals.

"I changed my stick, actually, so I shoot slapshots better," Werenski said. "I shoot them harder now. I just have to be more of a shooter. I was that a couple years ago, and I feel like when I'm doing that and getting shots through, and I'm being aggressive and attacking the net, is when I'm at my best. So, that's a point of emphasis for me right now, to start the season, is just get pucks to the net, take them there, and then see what happens. It was nice to get one, but it would have been nicer in a win."

## Columbus Dispatch / Rewind: Columbus Blue Jackets keep composure to spoil Colorado Avalanche home opener

**By Brian Hedger- October 13, 2024**

DENVER — The Blue Jackets didn't get a win to open the season but they're coming home with a 6-4 upset victory over the Colorado Avalanche at Ball Arena.

After building a 5-3 lead in the first two periods, they kept the Avs at bay for 18-plus minutes of the third until Ross Colton cut it to 5-4 with 1:20 left and the Avalanche net empty for a 6-on-5 advantage. Momentum swung entirely to the Avs' side, sending a packed arena into a frenzy, but a holding penalty on Casey Mittelstadt with 39 seconds left helped the Blue Jackets thwart the comeback.

"It reinforces a lot of things we're trying to do as a team," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "They have some positive vibes about how we're playing the game and how they played the game together ... in a tough building to play against and a tough team."

Kirill Marchenko scooped up a loose puck with time winding down, sent a setup to Sean Monahan in front of the empty net and that sealed the deal. The Blue Jackets (1-1-0) return home next for what's going to be an emotional night remembering Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau prior to their home-opener Tuesday against the Florida Panthers.

### Columbus Blue Jackets pull off stunner, spoil Colorado Avalanche home opener

A great start, strong response after Colorado pulled even and a two-goal lead protected in the third period added up to the Blue Jackets earning their first win of the season late Saturday night against a Stanley Cup contender.

Goals by Zach Werenski, Kent Johnson, Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko and Yegor Chinakhov provided the lead for Tarasov, who made 26 saves to earn the win in his first start this season. Monahan's empty-netter sealed it late.

### Colorado Avalanche cut Columbus Blue Jackets' lead to 5-4, late third period

Ross Colton scored a 6-on-5 goal with 1:19 left in regulation, pulling the Avs to within 5-4 with their net empty. The Blue Jackets are trying to hang on.

### Columbus Blue Jackets fending off Colorado Avalanche midway into third

As expected, the Avs have come out flying for the third period. They've pinned the puck inside the Blue Jackets' end of the ice for much of the first 9:28 before Columbus finally got some offensive zone time prior to the period's long TV stoppage.

The score remains 5-3 in favor of the Blue Jackets, who'd love to make a great memory before their long, late flight home tonight.

### Third period has started at Ball Arena: Blue Jackets 5, Avalanche 3

Here we go. The puck is down for the third period and the Blue Jackets have a two-goal margin to protect with the potential of spoiling the Avalanche's home opener at stake. Goalies remain Tarasov for Columbus, Annunen for Colorado. Atmosphere in here is electric.

### Second intermission: Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Colorado Avalanche 3

That was an entertaining period of hockey, now wasn't it?

The Blue Jackets and Avalanche combined to score five goals, all scored in the first 9:49 of the period. Colorado had the better of it, topping Columbus 13-7 in shots and 12-10 in scoring chances, according to Natural Stat Trick.

The Avalanche have a 23-15 edge in shots through the first two periods, but the Blue Jackets have the lead thanks to goals by Zach Werenski, Kent Johnson, Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko and Yegor Chinakhov — the last three scored in the second. Colorado's goals were scored by Nathan MacKinnon, Miles Wood and Casey Mittelstadt, the last two in the second.

The Avs are 2 for 3 on power plays, so the Blue Jackets have to be mindful of not taking bad penalties in the third. MacKinnon will definitely rally his team during this intermission break, since the Avs lost their season-opener 8-4 on Wednesday and now find themselves down 5-3 in their soldout home opener.

He's going to come out of the locker room for the third breathing fire, so this will be a great test for the Blue Jackets. Those who haven't erased their memory banks from last season will recall the Jackets blew way too many leads in third periods of games they wound up losing.

New head coach, new systems and some new players too. Lets' see how it works out for them.

Yegor Chinakhov puts Blue Jackets up 5-3 in the second period

The Blue Jackets might have some issues keeping pucks out of their net again this season, but they've played an exciting brand of hockey in their first two games. If this is what the rest of the season is going to be like, buckle your chin straps.

Midway through the second period, the Blue Jackets are again ahead by two goals, 5-3, after Yegor Chinakhov's first goal of the season. Camping in front of the net, he snapped a quick shot off Sean Monahan's feed from behind the net off Annunen's shoulder and into the net at 9:49 of the period.

Zach Aston-Reece ruled out with upper-body injury

Aston-Reece, the recipient of a high hit early in the first period by Colorado's Chris Wagner, is out for the rest of the game with an upper-body injury. He played just 34 seconds on one shift.

Kirill Marchenko puts Blue Jackets back on top 4-3, still early second

We're getting into Oprah levels of goal scoring here.

"You get a goal! You get a goal! You, sir, you also get a goal!"

Less than a minute after Mittelstadt knotted it 3-3, Kirill Marchenko netted his first goal of the season to put the Blue Jackets back on top, 4-3, at 4:33 of the second period. Marchenko wheeled in the slot and fired a low wrist shot that snuck under Annunen's left pad.

Casey Mittelstadt ties it 3-3 for Avalanche with another power play goal

Just 1:31 after Wood's goal got the Avs within a goal, Mittelstadt even the score to cap a power play following Damon Severson's slashing penalty.

Adam Fantilli, Miles Wood exchange early goals for Blue Jackets, Avalanche in second period

Fantilli's first goal of the season, scored on his 20th birthday, put the Blue Jackets up 3-1 just 1:56 into the second, chasing Avalanche goalie Alexandar Georgiev for backup Justus Annunen.

The margin didn't last long, however. Wood scored 15 seconds into the ensuing shift to pull Colorado within a goal again at 3-2 at 2:11 of the period.

Second period underway for Columbus Blue Jackets, Colorado Avalanche

The Blue Jackets and Avalanche are back on the ice at Ball Arena with the score still favoring Columbus 2-1 almost two minutes into the second period. Cole Sillinger's line took the opening shift for the Blue Jackets.

First intermission: Columbus Blue Jackets 2, Colorado Avalanche 1

The Avalanche started the game with intensity in their home-opener, but the Blue Jackets punched back — literally at first and then via the scoreboard. Mathieu Olivier standing up for Zach Aston-Reese following a high hit by Colorado's Chris Wagner boosted the game's intensity even more, paving the way for Columbus goals 1:07 apart by Zach Werenski and Kent Johnson.

The Avalanche outshot the Blue Jackets 10-8 in the period, but most of their offense was generated after they'd fallen behind by two goals. Columbus had Colorado on its collective heels for a large part of the period before the Avs rallied late on Nathan MacKinnon's late power-play goal.

Cole Sillinger tripping penalty leads to MacKinnon power play goal foe Colorado Avalanche

Late in the first period, the Avalanche finally started to get some traction inside the Blue Jackets' zone. They racked up shots against Tarasov, controlled the puck and eventually drew Cole Sillinger into a tripping penalty for Colorado's first power play.

MacKinnon capped it, cutting the Columbus lead to 2-1 with just eight seconds left in the period. That's how the score stayed at the horn.

Columbus Blue Jackets impressive early against Colorado Avalanche

Two games and almost four periods into their season, the Blue Jackets look like a team on a mission here at Ball Arena. They lead 2-0 with 5:29 left in the first period on goals by Werenski and Johnson, but they've also made Georgiev work to keep it that margin. Daniil Tarasov is also looking good in net.

Columbus Blue Jackets race out to 2-0 lead on Werenski, Johnson goals

Shots that didn't go into the net Thursday in Minnesota for the Blue Jackets are now going into the net here in Colorado. They've taken a quick 2-0 lead on goals by Zach Werenski at 6:38 of the first period and Kent Johnson at 7:45 against Avalanche goalie Alexandar Georgiev.

Werenski, a defenseman, charged down the slot on a 3-on-2 rush and deflected a perfect backhand pass from Yegor Chinakhov past Georgiev's right pad for a 1-0 lead. Just 67 seconds later, Johnson raced up the right wing and fired a wrist shot from a sharp angle that beat Georgiev high to the short side.

Werenski and Johnson have scored every goal of the Blue Jackets' young season thus far, two each and one in each game.

Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier takes issue with illegal hit by Avalanche forward Chris Wagner

Just 2:41 into the game, the Blue Jackets and Avalanche got into a physical altercation after Avalanche forward Chris Wagner clipped Blue Jackets forward Zach Aston-Reese high with his left elbow during action inside the Colorado zone. Mathieu Olivier skated over after the whistle and cross-checked Wagner in the chest, knocked him to the ice and began throwing punches.

It set off a melee that gave the Blue Jackets an early power play. Olivier was sent off for roughing, while Wagner was called for interference and Josh Manson was assessed the extra penalty for roughing. The Avalanche killed off the Jackets' power play and the game remains 0-0 early in the first.

That sequence may have set an early tone for this one, though.

Columbus Blue Jackets vs Colorado Avalanche have started

After an on-ice celebration of Denver's dual MVPs from the NBA and NHL last season — Nuggets center Nikola Jokic and Avalanche center Nathan MacKinnon — the Blue Jackets are playing hockey at Ball Arena. It's 0-0 less than two minutes into the game.

Big game tonight for Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson

After playing seven years for the Blue Jackets, Jack Johnson ventured off to play for four other NHL teams before making his way back to Columbus this season. One of those teams he played with is the Avalanche, whom he played with for three seasons in two separate stints.

During his first season with the Avs, he contributed to winning the 2022 Stanley Cup. It was a crowning achievement for the gritty veteran defenseman, who played the past two seasons in Colorado. Following the Blue Jackets' optional morning skate, Johnson said he'll always remember time in the Rocky Mountains fondly.

"Those were special times," Johnson said. "It'll forever have a special place in my heart and I'll cherish those memories and lifelong friendships. When you win (a championship) somewhere, you're forever bonded with them, so it'll be a little weird playing against them again, but it's always a pleasure to see them."

Columbus Blue Jackets, Colorado Avalanche lines, defense pairs, goalies

This is the Avs' home opener, so they're going through pregame hype videos. We're inside 10 minutes from the scheduled puck drop. Neither team made changes to their projected lineups from morning skates. Here's another look at those:

Columbus Blue Jackets vs Colorado Avalanche lineups and starters

Here are the active lineups for each team, starters (in bold), scratches, coaches and officials.

Daniil Tarasov gets his first start of the season for Columbus Blue Jackets vs Colorado Avalanche

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters at the end of his morning press conference that his lineup against the Avalanche would be the same as it was in Minnesota, with one notable exception.

Elvis Merzlikins, who started the season-opener against the Wild, would handle the backup role at Ball Arena while Daniil Tarasov makes his season debut in the team's second game. Merzlikins outperformed Tarasov during the preseason and was solid while making 23 saves in Minnesota, so the decision was a little surprising. Tarasov, however, beat the Avalanche in April last season to split the two-game season series.

During the preseason, Merzlikins and Tarasov both got three starts. Tarasov started more often in games featuring more AHL players, while Merzlikins got mostly the NHL roster. Their numbers were starkly different, though. Merzlikins went 2-1-0 with a 1.91 goals-against average and .932 save percentage, while Tarasov went 1-2-0 with a 4.99 GAA and .809 save percentage while allowing 13 of the 27 goals the Blue Jackets allowed as a team in eight exhibition games.

Columbus Blue Jackets looking to lessen odd-man rushes allowed

Overall, the Blue Jackets were pleased with their performance to open the season Thursday at Xcel Energy Center. They lost a close one, 3-2, but dominated puck possession and two of their top three forward lines dictated play most of the night.

There were a few glaring issues, though. The Jackets' aggressiveness at the offensive end led to the Wild springing away for odd-numbered counterattacks, including a couple breakaways. They also had some hiccups inside their own blue line, most notably on Joel Eriksson Ek's goal in the second period. Adam

Fantilli overskated a puck along the wall, near the left point, and the Wild pounced on it for a tic-tac-toe play that resulted in the goal and a 2-1 lead.

Elvis Merzlikins took care of the breakaways and odd-man rushes with high-level saves, but the Blue Jackets don't want to put their goalies into as many of those situations going forward — especially against the Avs.

"We had a video session (Saturday) on some things in our defensive zone, and there were probably things in all three zones, that we wanted to just tighten up," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Nothing major, and to be honest, the mistakes that we made were pretty aggressive mistakes, which we've asked the group to do ... and we understand there will be mistakes that happen and end up in our net. We just need to limit them a little bit better."

Where to find the Columbus Blue Jackets' TV/Radio broadcast against Colorado Avalanche

Tonight's game will be broadcast by Bally Sports Ohio with Steve Mears on play-by-play and Jody Shelley providing in-game analysis. Pregame and postgame shows bookend the production.

Bob McGelligott will call the game on radio, which can be heard on stations included in the Blue Jackets Radio Network throughout Ohio and parts of West Virginia. Locally in Columbus, the game will be broadcast on the team's alternate flagship station, 93.3 FM The Bus.

Columbus Blue Jackets projected lineup vs Colorado Avalanche

Forwards

Yegor Chinakhov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko

James van Riemsdyk – Adam Fantilli – Kevin Labanc

Mikael Pyhtia – Cole Sillinger – Kent Johnson

Zach Aston-Reese – Sean Kuraly – Mathieu Olivier

Defense pairings

Zach Werenski – Ivan Provorov

Jake Christiansen – Damon Severson

Jack Johnson – Erik Gudbranson

Goalies

Daniil Tarasov

Elvis Merzlikins

Scratched: D Jordan Harris, D David Jiricek, F Dylan Gambrell

Injured: F Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery), F Dmitry Voronkov (upper body), F Justin Danforth (wrist), F Gavin Brindley (fractured finger)

Colorado Avalanche projected lineup vs Columbus Blue Jackets

Forwards

Nikolai Kovalenko – Nathan MacKinnon – Mikko Rantanen

Ross Colton – Casey Mittelstadt – Calum Ritchie

Miles Wood – Parker Kelly – Logan O'Connor



Ivan Ivan – Chris Wagner – Joel Kiviranta

Defense pairings

Devon Toews – Cale Makar

Samuel Girard – Josh Manson

Calvin de Haan – Sam Malinski

Goalies

Alexandar Georgiev

Justus Annunen

Scratched: F Jonathan Drouin (upper body), D John Ludvig, D Oliver Kylington , G Kaapo Kahkonen

Injured reserve/not active: F Gabriel Landeskog (knee), F Valeri Nichushkin (NHL/NHLPA program), F Artturi Lehkonen (shoulder), D Tucker Poolman (undisclosed)

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 'kid' core is quickly gaining NHL footing

**By Brian Hedger- October 13, 2024**

The Blue Jackets' "kids" are growing up.

They're not toddlers anymore. Some are already out of middle school. They're growing into legitimate NHL regulars, which means it's time for Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger, Kirill Marchenko, Yegor Chinakhov and even Adam Fantilli — who played his 50th NHL game Thursday — to take a few driving courses. They're going to be driving the bus eventually, and it might happen sooner than later.

The young core's involvement in handling key lineup roles is becoming a necessity, based on the staggering amount of experience the Blue Jackets have lost the past year.

Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed while biking a couple weeks before training camp. A week before that, Patrik Laine was traded. Boone Jenner needed surgery Wednesday to repair a shoulder injury and could be out until March. Dmitry Voronkov (shoulder) is expected to be out until late November, if not longer.

Alexandre Texier was also traded, Adam Boqvist had the final year of his contract bought out, Jake Bean, Nick Blankenburg and Alexander Nylander weren't offered extensions, and all of that followed deadline trades last season that involved Jack Roslovic and Andrew Peeke.

The Blue Jackets still have a good group of veterans in the driver's seat, but the younger set is riding shotgun.

"I don't care if you've played one game or you've played 1,000 games in this league, and I've stressed that to our group," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "You play hockey the same way. Sure, is experience good? Yeah, of course it is, but the energy, the excitement that a first-year guy or guy playing his first game is pretty special, as well."

The Blue Jackets don't have many of those, though. Their youngsters all had NHL experience before this season, including rookie Mikael Pyyhtia (20 games). Others are higher up the ladder and climbing.

Sillinger logged his 221st NHL game in the Jackets' 3-2 loss to the Minnesota Wild, Johnson played his 131st game, Marchenko played his 138th game and Chinakhov skated in his 146th. Fantilli would have his 100th game on the horizon if a lacerated calf hadn't stopped his rookie season in its tracks at 49 games. The Blue Jackets also have three young defensemen — Jordan Harris (131 games), Jake Christiansen (45 games) and David Jiricek (47 games) — plus goalie Daniil Tarasov (45 games).

Combined with a solid group of veterans led by Zach Werenski, Sean Monahan, James van Riemsdyk, Sean Kuraly, Erik Gudbranson and others, the Blue Jackets still have the potential to comfortably exceed the low expectations many have for this team.

If it happens, a fast maturing group of "kids" will play a big role.

"We're super excited," Fantilli said. "We have a lot to prove going into the season. We've lost some pieces, and we've got some young guys who have to step up, but I think we can surprise a lot of people this year. I think we're going to be a good team, when a lot of people aren't expecting us to be."

It was only one game, but it showed in Minnesota. Johnson had a hand in both Columbus goals, scoring the first and setting up the second, while Sillinger and Chinakhov added assists.

Chinakhov and Marchenko also skated as Monahan's wingers and dominated possession numbers. They hounded and hogged the puck, created scoring chances without giving up many and forced goalie Filip Gustavsson to be sharp all game. Sillinger, Johnson and Pythia had similar success in those areas, and their forechecking pressure led to the Jackets' first goal.

Evason was impressed, knowing his roster remains one of the NHL's greenest.

"I haven't made a lot of it," he said. "Our team is our team. I love our balance of skill and size and speed and bite. Defensively, we're sound. We think we can score goals, get up and down the ice. We're looking forward to getting started."

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets stun Colorado Avalanche: 6 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- October 14, 2024

DENVER — This wasn't supposed to happen.

Teams that have lost as much talent, experience and leadership as the Blue Jackets — again predicted to finish at the bottom of the NHL — aren't supposed to visit a Stanley Cup contender's home and leave victorious after holding four two-goal leads. Tell it to the Blue Jackets (1-1-0), who did exactly that Saturday in a 6-4 win to spoil the Colorado Avalanche's home opener at Ball Arena.

"We showed we can compete against those teams," Blue Jackets goalie Daniil Tarasov said, "and we can get a real good result."

Here are six takeaways, one for every Blue Jackets goal:

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan has night to remember against Colorado Avalanche

Sean Monahan, who turned 30 Saturday, won't soon forget this win, his role in it or becoming the first Blue Jacket to don a new postgame "donkey" hat, which replaced the Jackets' Civil War era Kepi hat worn by a player chosen by a teammate after victories.

Johnny Gaudreau, a close friend and former teammate of Monahan's, used to enjoy calling friends and teammates a "donkey," which led to the new twist to include him as part of locker room celebrations.

"To be honest, it's emotional," Monahan said. "It's nice to get our first win. You feel the love from this organization, I feel the love from my teammates and obviously I can feel the love from John."

Gaudreau and his younger brother, Matthew, were killed Aug. 29 while biking in New Jersey. Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey hangs in a stall inside the Blue Jackets' locker room for every game this season, home and road. The Gaudreau brothers will be remembered with an on-ice ceremony Tuesday before the Blue Jackets' home opener against the Florida Panthers.

Columbus Blue Jackets' first line showing quick chemistry

Had Filip Gustavsson not been sharp for the Minnesota Wild in the Jackets' 3-2 loss Thursday at Xcel Energy Center, the Blue Jackets' top line of Monahan, Marchenko and Yegor Chinakhov might have stuffed their stat lines in that game too. They didn't produce a goal in that one, but dominated stats that gauge possession, scoring chances and expected goals.

Two days later, they had similar success while netting three goals. Each finished with one goal, two assists and three points against the Avalanche, showing that chemistry between them is quickly heating up.

"Chinny (had) his game today, 'Monny' too," Marchenko said. "We just feel synergy."

Daniil Tarasov comes up big for Columbus Blue Jackets in win over Colorado Avalanche

Allowing four goals on 30 shots isn't usually cause for a goalie to feel good about his performance, but there are exceptions. Daniil Tarasov made a lot of key saves for the Blue Jackets against one of the NHL's most dangerous offensive attacks, led by Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar.

Tarasov picked up the win in his first start of the season, getting the nod over Elvis Merzlikins based largely on his performance in a 4-1 victory against Colorado in April last season. It went against logic

based on this season's preseason numbers for the Blue Jackets' top goalies. Merzlikins outperformed Tarasov by a lot, statistically, in his three preseason games and was solid Thursday in a 3-2 loss to Minnesota.

Tarasov came up big several times to nix scoring chances for the Avalanche, including a decision to come far out of his net to thwart Mikko Rantanen's developing breakout.

"It was kind of 50/50," Tarasov said. "It was happening pretty quickly. I just tried to, like, keep this puck away from my net."

#### Columbus Blue Jackets make a third-period lead hold

It wasn't perfect, but the Blue Jackets' performance protecting a lead in the third was far better than anything they showed last season.

For starters, they didn't turtle. There was no group effort to sink into a defensive circle and hope for the best. The Blue Jackets turtled too much last season, especially in the first two months, and paid a stiff price by going 2-2-11 in 15 games when they coughed up leads in the third. The Blue Jackets played a lot more aggressively in the third against the Avalanche and it showed.

Colorado buzzed in the Jackets' zone while hanging onto the puck, but it didn't lead to a lopsided disbursement of even-strength shots, which were even (7-7) or high-danger scoring chances, which favored the Blue Jackets (3-1). That's how you close out wins while leading by multiple goals.

"It's obviously nice to keep a lead, but to not sit back and just defend was exciting for us, as a (coaching) staff," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We stayed aggressive. We didn't risk a whole lot, but we didn't just shut down and go into a shell and just try to defend and block shots. Our guys played the game the right way."

#### Young forwards give Columbus Blue Jackets another push

Four of the Blue Jackets' six goals and 10 of their 16 points were tallied by players they recently drafted or signed as prospects.

Chinakhov recorded the second three-point game of his NHL career with a goal and two assists. Marchenko notched his third three-point game in the NHL and first that wasn't a hat trick. Kent Johnson's goal in the first was his second goal of the season and second in as many games.

Adam Fantilli scored a goal on his 20th birthday. Even goalie Daniil Tarasov got into the act with an assist on Fantilli's goal. It's only two games, but the Blue Jackets' young core has played with a confidence that just wasn't consistently present the past couple years. It's there now, and the veterans notice.

"You can see some of the young players on the team maturing quickly," Monahan said. "They want to be impact players in the league, they want to be impact players on this team and we're going to need them to step up every night to give ourselves a chance to win every night."

#### Blue Jackets centers Fantilli, Monahan score birthday goals against Colorado Avalanche

Monahan and Fantilli share the same birthday, separated by 10 years. The former is now 30, while Fantilli turned 20 Saturday. Both scored to celebrate, including Monahan's to seal the win after scoring into an empty net late in the third.

On that one, Marchenko got to a loose puck cleared by Chinakhov and carried it toward the net before pulling up for a short dish to set Monahan up with the honors.

"That's what makes a team a 'team,'" Monahan said. "You see a guy and you get another guy a touch, those little things go a long way, and I think that shows with 'Marchy' giving it to me."

## The Athletic / Johnny Gaudreau was in Matt Boldy's heart during Wild star's 3-point night

By Michael Russo- October 12, 2024

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Growing up outside Boston and dreaming of going to school and playing hockey for Boston College, Matt Boldy idolized Johnny Gaudreau.

He watched every moment of his Hobey Baker season in 2014, a year Gaudreau scored a ridiculous 36 goals and 80 points in 40 games. And in 2012, two days after Boldy turned 11 years old, he watched with glee as “Johnny Hockey” scored a spectacular goal in the third period to help lead the Eagles to the national championship as a freshman.

“He’s just an unbelievable human being, someone I looked up to so much,” Boldy said.

In May, Boldy finally got to meet and spend time with his childhood hero when John Hynes, Boldy’s Minnesota Wild coach, put Boldy on Gaudreau’s line for the United States in the World Championship in Czechia.

Boldy led the tournament with 14 points. Gaudreau had 11.

“I had my buddies texting me, like, ‘We grew up watching this guy, thinking he was a god in Boston, and you’re playing on a line with him!’” Boldy said.

Boldy had no idea when he assisted on Gaudreau’s short-handed goal on a two-on-one against Kazakhstan on May 19 that it would be Gaudreau’s last goal.

Boldy was absolutely gutted when he learned in late August that the Columbus Blue Jackets star and his brother, Matthew, were killed in New Jersey when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver while riding their bikes.

Thursday night, the Wild and Blue Jackets kicked off the 2024-25 season. Before the game, the Wild honored Gaudreau and his brother with a video tribute, then held a 13-second moment of silence (Gaudreau’s jersey number).

Johnny Gaudreau set up Matt Boldy and USA leads 2-0. #MensWorlds pic.twitter.com/K9Qhrbv0CZ  
— Steven Ellis (@SEllisHockey) May 7, 2024

Boldy, in the starting lineup for the Wild, watched every second of that tribute and did his best to hold it together.

“It was good that they did it,” Boldy said. “They mean so much to the hockey world. See how close everyone is, how much respect everyone has for the Gaudreus. As bad as a situation it is, it’s the hockey community coming together and having a moment for them, their family. The recognition is, I think, important.”

Boldy, who didn’t play a second of preseason hockey because of a lower-body injury sustained on the third day of training camp, proceeded to score a goal and two assists in a 3-2 victory.

Two years ago when Marcus Johansson was traded to the Wild, Dean Evason assembled a Johansson-Joel Eriksson Ek-Boldy line, and the trio was one of the best lines in hockey down the stretch. Boldy, especially, erupted. They were so good, Johansson earned a two-year, \$4 million extension because where else were the cap-strapped Wild going to find a second-line left wing that inexpensive who could mesh so well with Boldy?

Now, in front of Evason in his debut as Columbus' coach, the trio would combine for two goals, 6 points and seven shots.

But it was Boldy looking so good that must have the Wild feeling ecstatic.

Hynes had been subtly hinting all camp that he expects a breakout year from Boldy, who scored 60 goals and 132 points the past two years. President of hockey operations and general manager Bill Guerin has gone further, going on "Spittin' Chiclets" last month and saying Boldy, at some point, has the potential of scoring 50 goals and 50 assists.

What did Boldy think of Guerin's prediction?

"I think you set your goals high," he said. "You should never set goals that are going to be easy. I think that's why a lot of guys are in the NHL, and why guys are successful. It's not easy. It's a lot of work, but you strive for bigger rather than smaller."

If you look at Boldy, he's got all the tools to give Kirill Kaprizov the support of a second star on the roster. He can fly, he's got great vision, he's as good a passer as he is a shooter and he's one smart hockey player, so smart the Wild plan to incorporate him onto the penalty kill once they can get him practice reps.

Ottawa Senators young forward Shane Pinto also played with Boldy at the World Championship and was blown away at his skill level.

"This year, he's going to get like 90 to 100 points," Pinto said last month. "The way he protects the puck, he's 6-2, he shoots it hard, he's smart, fast for that big of a guy. It's not going to be a breakout year because he already put up (69), but I think he could take definitely the next step."

Added Eriksson Ek: "Just watching the end of last year, you could really tell what he's become and what he's becoming. I think he's — I don't want to pump his tires too much — but I said it before I think he might be close to 100 points at some point in his career. He's just so smart and so big and so strong. He loves hockey, too. So, it's just fun to watch him and share the ice with him."

"I don't think there is a ceiling for that guy," Johansson said. "He's a pretty good hockey player."

When Evason was fired last season, Boldy had scored one goal in 12 games. Hynes arrived and Boldy scored 28 goals and 61 points in 63 games (a 36-goal, 79-point pace over 82 games). Boldy continued the prolific output for Hynes at worlds.

It sure seems like the two have hit it off and Boldy thrives in his system. Boldy says Hynes has "a lot of trust in me, in my game, to go out there and play within the system, but free enough to be creative and play my game."

"He seems very receptive to coaching," Hynes said. "We have conversations. I think we've had a good relationship. I think from when I've gotten here, there's not one thing I can point at other than there's good chemistry. He's willing to listen and learn, I'm willing to listen to him, as well, and have different conversations."

"Sometimes it's just in the way that you deal with someone. It just seems like it really worked, and I'm excited about that because he's not only a great player for our team, but he's a young guy and there's so much upside to him. So I think when you can continue to foster that relationship and help him continue to grow, and you trust each other, that's usually how it happens."

If the Wild are going to get back to the playoffs after missing the dance last season for only the second time since 2012, they are going to need a big year from Boldy and particularly the second line to take pressure off Kaprizov.

Boldy knows it and wants to do everything to support Kaprizov and learn from the superstar.

“For me, just being able to look up to him and follow his lead, he’s a superstar,” Boldy said. “He’s one of the best players in the league. I think the way he does it is so special. He’s so hard and strong, and he doesn’t do it the easy way. It’s admiring looking at him, how skilled he is, and the guy can score on every shot, it seems like ... it’s stupid. He’s fun to watch, and I’m definitely trying to emulate him.”

Against the Blue Jackets, Boldy scored the first goal of the Wild’s season with a quick shot through Eriksson Ek’s screen. He then got the secondary assist on Eriksson Ek’s goal after a Karlstad-to-Karlstad, Sweden, connection of Johansson to Eriksson Ek. He later assisted on the Wild’s power-play winner, a scintillating pass to Mats Zuccarello.

Teammates say Boldy is simply dialed in and ramping up for a monster year.

“If he has a good day in practice, he snaps it back and forth and he puts it wherever he wants,” goalie Filip Gustavsson said after his 31-save outing Thursday night. “And if you take it a little easy on him sometimes in shots, he scores and he’s all over you for the rest of practice. It’s a very high battle between the goalies and him.”

Most of all, Boldy wants to win after missing the playoffs last year.

“It’s embarrassing,” he said. “I think guys want to do well. Guys want to make the playoffs, and we want to do it for each other and the fans and the organization and everything. I think it could be a good thing for us, looking back at it now. It obviously sucked in the moment, but that extra drive to know that we have to be better, and we have to play better in those bigger games, I think it’s going to drive us all year.

“And I want to be a big part of that.”



## [The Athletic / Blue Jackets' recently built No. 1 line unites, erupts in surprising win over Avalanche](#)

**By Aaron Portzline- October 13, 2024**

DENVER — As the final seconds ticked away in a surprising win by the Columbus Blue Jackets on Saturday, forward Kirill Marchenko passed up a surefire empty-net goal — it would have been his second of the night — so Sean Monahan could score his first with the Jackets.

Marchenko passed the puck to his left across an empty Colorado Avalanche net, setting up Monahan for a slam dunk goal with 12 seconds remaining to cap a 6-4 win in Ball Arena.

It was a perfect way for the Blue Jackets to earn their first win of the season, a perfect way to cap a monster night for the Blue Jackets' top line, and a powerful statement about how this makeshift roster has come together under first-year coach Dean Evason, who earned his first win with Columbus.

"They've got a chemistry, a relationship, a bond in that room already," Evason said. "When you have that, you're not just playing for yourself; you're playing for each other.

"They helped each other tonight. There were times in the game where we could have lost our composure, and they didn't. The mood on the bench, the leaders, they were very calm and kept the group very stable throughout the game."

Would the Blue Jackets have won this game last season? Almost certainly not.

The Blue Jackets' No. 1 line was expected to be Monahan at center, with Marchenko and Boone Jenner flanking him on the wings. But a late training camp injury to Jenner, who is out for several months after shoulder surgery, prompted Evason to move Yegor Chinakhov into that spot.

Chinakhov, Monahan and Marchenko each had one goal, two assists and plus-3 ratings Saturday. They totaled eight shots, and Monahan went 11-of-21 on draws.

"I'm still getting used to it," Monahan told Bally Sports Columbus after the game. "With new linemates, you try to make reads, you try to enjoy playing with them. They're great players with speed. There's a lot of puck touches and guys who want the puck, so it's been a lot of fun."

The Blue Jackets had six goal scorers — including Zach Werenski, Kent Johnson and Adam Fantilli — and goaltender Daniil Tarasov, making his first start, had 26 saves. Fantilli, who turned 20 on Saturday, and Monahan, who turned 30, celebrated their birthdays by scoring goals.

But it was the top line that really stood out.

It was only fair to wonder how it might work, or if it might work, as Chinakhov and Jenner play starkly different games. Chinakhov is a budding offensive talent with an elite-level shot, but Jenner is more physical and probably a more advanced 200-foot player.

Through two games, that line's biggest strength has been its ability to possess the puck. That, along with Monahan's ability to help foster the club's young forwards, is why the Blue Jackets signed him to a five-year, \$27.5 million contract in free agency.

"They've got a lot of chemistry," Evason said. "The two Russians probably have had that before, but Sean ... I'm sure he's an easy guy to play with because he does all the little things right."

The Jackets took a 2-0 first-period lead when Werenski and Johnson scored only 1:07 apart, beginning at 6:38 on the clock. The Avs tied it at 3 as part of a flurry of goals early in the second period, but the Blue Jackets surged back ahead the rest of the period.

Marchenko made it 4-3 Columbus at 4:33 before Monahan and Chinakhov worked the puck back and forth off a rebound to make it 5-3 on a Chinakhov goal at 9:49. Their final tally was Marchenko's easy feed to Monahan, a rush out of the zone that was started by Chinakhov.

The only downer on the night was an injury to fourth-line winger Zach Aston-Reese, who was hit high by Colorado's Chris Wagner only 2:41 into the game and did not return.

Sean Monahan gets the postgame donkey for the #CBJ. There's a 13 patch on the side because Johnny Gaudreau loved calling people a donkey. Fitting Sean gets it first. [pic.twitter.com/AaVFydMqhK](https://pic.twitter.com/AaVFydMqhK)

— Jeff Svoboda (@JacketsInsider) October 13, 2024

Monahan did his postgame TV interview wearing a donkey hat. Yes, a donkey hat. The old Civil War kepi the Blue Jackets have used previously is either retired or on hiatus.

The late Johnny Gaudreau, it seems, used to call his closest friends "donkeys" — hey, it's a guy thing — so the players had a donkey cap made for just the right occasion.

"If you knew John, he probably called you a donkey a thousand times," Monahan said. "It's something we're doing for him. It puts a smile on our faces. He's probably looking down laughing at me right now."

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Changes have Zach Werenski poised to reach a new level

**By Aaron Portzline- October 14, 2024**

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

Item No. 1: Built for 'Z'

It has been said that this Blue Jackets season will be mostly about the emergence of their young, dynamic players — forwards Yegor Chinakhov, Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson and Cole Sillinger. So far, those four have not disappointed in the Jackets' impressive start to the season.

But if you've watched the first two games — a 3-2 loss in Minnesota on Thursday and a 6-4 win in Colorado on Saturday — one of the hardest players to ignore was veteran defenseman Zach Werenski.

The new system and attitude installed in the dressing room by new coach Dean Evason seem tailor-made to Werenski, who dropped 10-12 pounds over the offseason, he said, so that he could move quicker and log bigger minutes in a highly aggressive system.

Remember the Werenski who suffered through a 38-game goal-scoring drought last season? That's not easy to do now.

Werenski has scored goals in each of the Blue Jackets' first two games: the first a product of a new stick and a new approach on the power play, and the second a product of the new system that encourages — no, demands — that he and the other defensemen join the rush, carry the puck down low in the offensive zone, etc., whenever the chance is there.

"It's just aggressive all over the ice," Werenski said. "We're going to make mistakes by being aggressive, kind of like our teams under Torts (former coach John Tortorella). Just go, and if you make a mistake by being aggressive, we'll live with that.

"I think that's how you have to play. If you give five guys time and space, they're too good. I just love that mentality."

The power-play goal in St. Paul, Minn., on Thursday was noteworthy.

It was late in the third period when Chinakhov slid a sharp pass across the top of the zone to Werenski, who was just inside the top of the right circle. Werenski didn't gather the puck, aim and let loose with his patented wrister. No, he ripped a one-timer inside the near post.

Werenski's shot wasn't a full-fledged, step-into-it slap shot. But he doesn't score right there if he doesn't let loose immediately with a shot.

The last time Werenski scored a power-play goal on a slap shot? March 1, 2020, in a win over Vancouver in Nationwide Arena.

"I changed my stick, actually, so I can shoot snap shots now," Werenski said. "I'm shooting harder. I have to be more of a shooter. I was that a couple of years ago."

Werenski skated this summer with a group that included Nashville Predators defenseman Roman Josi, a 2020 winner of and three-time finalist for the Norris Trophy, awarded to the league's top blueliner. You might say Werenski came away from that experience with a souvenir.

The decision was made to change the flex of his stick, from an '85,' which was on the low end among NHL defensemen, to a '95,' which is more common across the league. The higher the number, the stiffer the stick.

Voilà, the Werenski slap shot.

It's hard to argue with Werenski's credentials as an offensive defenseman. Since he joined the league in 2016-17, only six defensemen have more goals than Werenski (92): Josi (129), Brent Burns (114), Dougie Hamilton (108), Victor Herman (107), John Carlson (99), and Alex Pietrangelo (93).

A slap shot adds an element the Blue Jackets have been missing since Seth Jones departed, especially on the power play.

Makin' it look E-Z! @FanaticsBook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/ONMsENGv01

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) October 13, 2024

Werenski's goal only 6:38 into Saturday's game was once again assisted by Chinakhov, but under completely different circumstances.

The Blue Jackets were quick with the puck out of their own zone, and Werenski quickly read the play and joined the rush with Chinakhov, getting a stride ahead of Avs defender Josh Manson. Chinakhov's backhand pass from the right circle to the goal mouth was a beauty and Werenski finished it.

Werenski has always been a mobile defenseman and has always been willing to join the rush. But Evason's new system sets him free in a way that hasn't happened since his rookie season when Tortorella immediately dubbed him the 'rover' and allowed him to create.

The 27-year-old was wise enough to see this coming, so he changed his offseason diet to lose weight and be able to play heavy minutes at a high pace. He cut out most carbohydrates and sugars, meaning he's "mostly a carnivore now."

"I was between 218 and 222 last season," Werenski said. "Now I'm between 207 and 211. Big difference. I feel faster and I feel like playing 25 minutes is a lot easier. Think about it. You take a 10-pound weight off, you're going to feel faster."

Item No. 2: Tuesday's game

Tuesday's game in Nationwide Arena against the Florida Panthers will be the Blue Jackets' home opener, but it won't be celebrated as such. The game has been dedicated to the memory of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, and it figures to be an emotional night at the rink.

The Blue Jackets, it must be said, have handled this tragic situation in the most graceful, respectful way possible. When the tragedy occurred on Aug. 29, it was only right to wonder if these players, this organization and these fans could ever find joy in hockey again.

Meredith Gaudreau's eulogy was incredibly powerful, and it was important in helping the Blue Jackets find a purpose for the season. There were no bad days at the rink for Johnny Gaudreau, she noted, and the Blue Jackets could honor him by adopting that approach.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell and coach Evason are both new to the organization — they had no existing relationship with any of these players before arriving in Columbus — but they've shown a masterful touch in allowing players to grieve while also encouraging them to smile and laugh at Gaudreau's memory.

They have kept Gaudreau very much alive in the dressing room with the frank and honest way they speak about his impact.

And, of course, there's veteran center Sean Monahan, who signed a five-year, \$27.5 million contract with Columbus in part because he wanted to play with Gaudreau again — as they had in Calgary a few years earlier — and wanted to raise their kids together.

A new tradition in honor of 13 ❤️💙

Only fitting that Monny wears the donkey for our first dub 🐴 pic.twitter.com/M9brYCATdt

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) October 13, 2024

Monahan spoke before the season opener in St. Paul on Thursday.

"It's a day-by-day process," Monahan said. "I mean, I don't really know how I handle it. You just do. I think it's something that I definitely think about all day.

"I live for Johnny. ... It's a new season. He should be here. It's always gonna be tough. He's my best friend. (Playing together) is something we were really looking forward to, and it's something that got taken away, so it's a tough one to still navigate."

It's fitting that the Blue Jackets are playing Florida on Tuesday. Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk became close friends with Gaudreau when they played together in Calgary.

The typical opening night festivities will be put on hold until Thursday's game against the Buffalo Sabres. Tuesday's events will likely be incredibly moving and memorable. Gaudreau's presence, like his sweater in the dressing room, still hangs all around Nationwide Arena.

The Blue Jackets made a change to their postgame routine, ditching the Civil War kepi that has been passed around the dressing room in recent seasons after wins. In its place is a donkey hat, which, if you knew Gaudreau, who called all of his close friends "donkey," is a poignant and humorous way to remember him.

Embrace Tuesday. Hug your friends and family.

Item No. 3: Snacks

- The Blue Jackets lost fourth-line left winger Zach Aston-Reese on his first shift Saturday when he was clipped in the head by Colorado's Chris Wagner. Aston-Reese skated off under his own power and went directly to the dressing room. He did not return. The Blue Jackets did not provide an update after the game, but it's possible forward Dylan Gambrell, a healthy scratch in the first two games, could make his Blue Jackets debut on Tuesday.
- Due to travel woes, the Blue Jackets didn't leave Denver after Saturday's win until 1:30 a.m. local time, or 3:30 a.m. in Columbus. They landed at Columbus' John Glenn International at 6:26 a.m., at which time most of the players and staff raced home and went to bed. Waddell, of course, headed straight into this office at Nationwide Arena.
- It appears that Blue Jackets winger Justin Danforth, who missed all of training camp as he recovered from offseason wrist surgery, is getting close to a return. Danforth made the season-opening trip to Minnesota and Colorado. On Friday, between the games, he took part in his first practice when the Blue Jackets skated at the University of Denver.
- The Blue Jackets provided updates on injured forwards Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov this week. The news on Jenner was not great. He had shoulder surgery last Wednesday in Vail, Colo., and stuck around in the area to join up with the Blue Jackets in Denver. The hope is he's able to return late in the season, perhaps in time for the March 1 Stadium Series game in Ohio Stadium between the Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings.

- The news on Voronkov was more positive. It was learned last week that he will not need surgery to repair an upper-body injury, and Waddell said he'd be surprised if Voronkov wasn't back playing by the end of November.
- Here's your Sunday Gathering trivia question: Werenski played his 488th NHL game on Saturday, all with Columbus. He's a few weeks away from becoming the fourth Blue Jackets defenseman to play 500 or more games. Name the other three.
- Mikael Pyyhtiä may not have made the season-opening roster if not for the injuries to Jenner and Voronkov, but he had a tremendous training camp and has quickly gained the trust of Evason and the coaching staff. He played a career-high 19:08 on Saturday as part of a checking line with center Sillinger and winger Kent Johnson. That line had the unenviable task of checking Nathan MacKinnon's line, one of the toughest tasks in the league. This is quite a step for Pyyhtiä, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2020. He'd played 19 games in the NHL before this season, including 17 in 2023-24. But they were prompted by a wave of injuries at midseason. Asked if he came to training camp believing he could earn a spot, Pyyhtiä smiled. "I knew there was a chance, but it was ... far (away)," he said. "I'm so excited. My friends and family (back home in Finland) are all saying congratulations."
- When coach Ken Hitchcock took over the Blue Jackets early in the 2006-07 season, one of his first bold moves was to put goal-scoring machine Rick Nash on the penalty kill. It worked wonders and Nash has often credited Hitchcock, and that move in particular, for helping to shape his career. Nearly 20 years later, Evason has made the same move with playmaker Kent Johnson, who has never been allowed near the PK in Columbus. Johnson led all Blue Jackets forwards on Saturday with 2:55 of short-handed time — part of the 21:30 he played overall, his most ever in a regulation game. But get this: Johnson's cumulative short-handed ice time heading into this season — we're talking 130 games — was 18 seconds, all during his rookie season. A little trust goes a long way.
- AHL Cleveland opened its season with a 7-3 loss in Hershey, Pa., which is where its last season ended in Game 7 of the AHL Eastern Conference semifinals. Defenseman Denton Mateychuk, who is playing on Cleveland's top pair with Cole Clayton, had a goal and an assist. Luca Del Bel Belluz is playing as the Monsters' No. 1 center, with wingers Rocco Grimaldi and Trey Fix-Wolansky, and Hunter McKown is centering the second line with James Malatesta and Owen Sillinger.
- The Monsters named Stefan Matteau captain, with Fix-Wolansky, Sillinger and Clayton the alternates.
- Grimaldi, a veteran of 203 NHL games with Florida, Colorado and Nashville, is now with his fifth AHL club in four seasons. He's a dynamic AHL scorer — he had 36-37-73 in 72 games with AHL Chicago last season — but has been waiting on a two-way NHL deal this summer, hoping to play his way back to the NHL where he last played (seven games) with Nashville in 2021-22. AHL Cleveland signed him to a 25-game player tryout agreement which allows him to stay active while he waits for such a deal with Columbus or any other NHL club. Given the Blue Jackets' depth issues up front, it makes sense that he would land with Columbus. He scored in his AHL Cleveland debut on Saturday.
- Trivia answer: The other three defensemen to play 500 or more games for the Blue Jackets are David Savard (597), Fedor Tyutin (553) and Rostislav Klesla (515). Jack Johnson (447) could join the group later this season, too.

## [BlueJackets.com / From Staten Island to Columbus, Labanc and Aston-Reese have shared their hockey journey](#)

**By Jeff Svoboda- October 12, 2024**

Well before Zach Aston-Reese worked his way into his dream job, he had one of the most quintessentially American lines of work one can have.

He was a paperboy.

From sixth to ninth grade, the Blue Jackets wing would wake up early in the morning and deliver newspapers to 40 houses around his Staten Island neighborhood of Randall Manor.

“I had a nice, easy route,” he said. “Customers would get mad because I wouldn’t collect for like 20 weeks and then I’d be like, you owe \$96.50 – plus tip. The bundle got dropped in front of my house. I would chuck ‘em. Got a couple complaints that the paper was in the bushes.”

That was the upbringing Aston-Reese had on the sometimes-overlooked borough of New York City. It was fitting for the working-class island just south of Manhattan, an expressway or ferry ride away from the glitz and glamour of the city that never sleeps.

For both Aston-Reese and fellow new CBJ acquisition Kevin Labanc, that was life growing up in the borough of nearly 500,000 residents. And it shows up in their play, which is part of why the two new CBJ forwards have been able to make it to the highest level of professional hockey.

“I think most people from Staten Island, they work hard,” said Labanc, who hails from New Dorp Beach. “I think when you play, you want to play the same way that you grew up with in that culture, working hard every day and just bringing it.”

The journey from enjoying Joe and Pat’s Pizzeria and Restaurant – serving classic thin crust pies since 1960 – to the NHL is a long one, but both have figured it out. The longtime friends and sometimes rivals have in many ways followed parallel paths to the NHL – as Staten Islanders, the fitting way to make it is the underdog route – and now they’ve amazingly reached an intersecting point.

Labanc was the first one to become a Blue Jacket, signing a one-year deal last Saturday after an excellent preseason with New Jersey. A 57-point player with San Jose in 2018-19, Labanc had a frustrating ending to his eight-year career with the Sharks last year and reported to the Devils on a PTO. After leading the NHL in preseason goals, he was signed by the Blue Jackets after injuries to Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov left the team thin on the front line.

The same logic led to Aston-Reese’s arrival in Columbus as well. The NCAA’s leading scorer in 2015-16 at Northeastern, he had carved out a role as a dependable checking line winger with teams across the NHL the past six years before signing with Vegas this offseason. But when Aston-Reese hit waivers as teams were cutting down their rosters last week, the Blue Jackets snapped him up to add depth to the forward unit.

Suddenly, the two players who had similar paths and trained together in the offseason were teammates. They’re two of three current NHLers to grow up in Staten Island – Los Angeles forward Arthur Kaliyev was the third, though he was born in Uzbekistan – and spent their childhoods on opposite sides of the island but first met when they were squirts.

During their childhood years, they were rarely teammates, playing against each other more than with, but they’ve worked with the same development coach, Tony Samms, since high school. Though their

paths would diverge – Aston-Reese worked his way from the USHL to college hockey at Northeastern, while Labanc went the OHL route – they reunited each summer to work to be the best they could be at the NHL level.

Not much was originally expected of either – Labanc was a sixth-round draft pick of the Sharks in 2014, while Aston-Reese was undrafted and signed his first contract with Pittsburgh after his college career – they never doubted the paths they were on.

“There was never really ever any panic,” Aston-Reese said. “It was always a straight vision, focusing on the path and not the trees in a way. We both took different routes and ended up in the same place. It’s kind of interesting if you think about it, but it’s always been hard work and just putting the work in. There’s no way around it.”

As they worked out with each other over the past few summers, they would compete for what they called the Chipotle Cup, as whoever lost that day’s game of soccer free kicks before training would have to buy lunch. Now on the same team with the Blue Jackets, the two can work toward capturing the Stanley Cup together.

“We always played against each other, never with each other, so this is a pretty surreal moment,” Labanc said. “We want to make the most of the situation and do well for the team and make the playoffs.”

If that were to happen, the borough of New York City that is full of fans of the local teams may have a union blue tinge.

“They love their hockey over there,” Labanc said. “You see so many people wearing Rangers jerseys, Devils jerseys. Now it’s gonna be a lot of Blue Jackets fans over there.”



## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets head to Colorado to face Avs](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- October 12, 2024

Columbus wants to keep building on a solid season opener in the second game of the year

BLUE JACKETS (0-1-0) at AVALANCHE (0-1-0), 9 PM, BALL ARENA

COLUMBUS, 8th in Metropolitan in 2023-24

COLORADO, third in Central in 2023-24

### HOW TO FOLLOW

TV: Bally Sports Ohio, Bally Sports app

RADIO: CBJ radio network (93.3 The Bus), CBJ app

If the Blue Jackets could change anything from the season-opening 3-2 loss at Minnesota on Thursday night, it would be the score.

Columbus left the Land of 10,000 Lakes feeling pretty swimmingly about its overall game, as the Blue Jackets played with solid defensive structure and went toe-to-toe with a team that fancies itself a contender in the Western Conference.

“Obviously not happy with the result, but I feel like our body of work in that game and how we played, if we do that, if that's our standard, we're gonna win a lot of hockey games,” alternate captain Zach Werenski said. “It’s definitely something to build on. I would like to get two points, but that’s how goes hockey sometimes.”

Don’t think the Blue Jackets are satisfied losing games, but they did see a lot to build on in the opener. There are always areas of improvement, which the team attacked in Friday’s practice in Denver, but all in all, the compete level and structure were strong.

Columbus allowed the Wild to just six high-danger chances in more than 50 minutes of 5-on-5 play per Natural Stat Trick, out-attempted Minnesota 48-32 at 5-on-5 and got some standout individual performances from Werenski (goal), Kent Johnson (goal and assist) and the top line of Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko (16-4 shot attempt edge).

“We didn't get the result, which we're not happy with obviously but we got the effort, we got the work, we got the visual of how we want to play, the reinforcement of how we want to play,” head coach Dean Evason said. “We didn't score a couple more goals and we made a couple of mistakes obviously for a couple of goals, which happened, but yeah, we liked how hard our group played tonight.”

The challenge doesn’t get any easier tonight against a Colorado team that has made the Stanley Cup Playoffs the past seven years, but Evason wants the Blue Jackets to bring the same game to altitude.

“We’d like to roll this performance right back,” he said. “Maybe correct a couple of situations. ... But we played the right way. So if we continue to do that, then hopefully that score will be flipped.”

Know The Foe: Colorado Avalanche

Head coach: Jared Bednar (Ninth season)

Team stats (2023-24): Goals per game: 3.68 (1st) | Scoring defense: 3.07 (16th) | PP: 24.5 percent (5th) | PK: 79.9 percent (12th)

The narrative: The 2022 Stanley Cup champions remain able to score with anyone, as such elite players as Nathan MacKinnon, Mikko Rantanen and Cale Makar make the Avs a tough matchup every night. The Avs have won at least 50 games each of the past three seasons but haven't been able to get back to the top of the mountain the last two years, losing in the first round (Seattle) in 2022-23 and the second round (Dallas) last year. It's a dangerous team, but it's not at full strength at the moment thanks to a bevy of injuries up front.

Team leaders: At age 29, MacKinnon has reached another level, winning the Hart trophy a season ago by posting 51 goals and a career-high 140 points, marks that were fourth and second in the league, respectively. He notched his 900th career point in the opener at Vegas. Coming off a 42-62-104 season that placed him eighth in the NHL in points, Rantanen notched a hat trick in the opener. Makar was second among NHL blueliners in goals (21) and points (90) a season ago.

What's new: There wasn't a lot of turnover to the Avs roster in the offseason, though the team did lose some depth pieces in current CBJ defenseman Jack Johnson as well as forward Brandon Duhaime and defenseman Sean Walker. Personnel is an issue at the moment, as forwards Gabriel Landeskog, Valeri Nichushkin, Artturi Lehkonen and Jonathan Drouin all out. The team is giving opportunity to such youngsters as 2023 first-round pick Calum Ritchie and forward Ivan Ivan, but the team dropped its opener 8-4 in Vegas on Wednesday.

Trending: The teams didn't play until the final month of the campaign a season ago, with both winning at home. Colorado took a 6-1 win in the Mile High City on March 22, while Columbus won 4-1 in Nationwide Arena on April 1. The series is an even 6-6-0 since 2017-18.

Former CBJ: None

Projected Lines (subject to change)

LW 59 Yegor Chinakhov	C 23 Sean Monahan	RW 86 Kirill Marchenko
LW 21 James van Riemsdyk	C 19 Adam Fantilli	RW 62 Kevin Labanc
LW 82 Mikael Pyyhtia	C 4 Cole Sillinger	RW 91 Kent Johnson
LW 27 Zach Aston-Reese	C 7 Sean Kuraly	RW 24 Mathieu Olivier
LD 8 Zach Werenski	RD 9 Ivan Provorov	G 40 Daniil Tarasov
LD 2 Jake Christiansen	RD 78 Damon Severson	G 90 Elvis Merzlikins
LD 3 Jack Johnson	RD 44 Erik Gudbranson	

Scratches: Dylan Gambrell, Jordan Harris, David Jiricek

Injured reserve/Injured/Non-Roster list: Boone Jenner (upper body), Dmitri Voronkov (upper body), Gavin Brindley (finger), Justin Danforth (wrist)

Roster Report: The Blue Jackets will keep the same 18-skater lineup tonight but with Tarasov getting his first start of the season.

## The Numbers Game

Kent Johnson posted his 11th career multipoint game and his sixth career game with at least one goal and one assist in the opener at Minnesota. ... Zach Werenski scored in a season opener for the second time in his career and had a team-best seven shots on goal. ... Werenski is coming off one of the best seasons in CBJ history, setting a franchise record for assists for a defenseman (46) and tying the mark for most points (57) in a season. ... New acquisition James van Riemsdyk has scored double digits in goals in all 15 of his NHL seasons, while fellow newbie Sean Monahan has eight 20-goal campaigns. ... Jack Johnson's 1,187 NHL games are 11th among active players, and his 445 games played for Columbus from 2012-18 are fifth all-time among CBJ defensemen. ... Kirill Marchenko is one of two players in team history to start his NHL career with consecutive 20-goal seasons. ... Erik Gudbranson is one assist away from 100 in his career.

## This Day in CBJ History

Oct. 12, 2000: Kevyn Adams scores two goals, including the game-winner at 4:13 of the second period, as the Blue Jackets post the first win in franchise history with a 3-2 victory over the Calgary Flames at the Saddledome.

Oct. 12, 2021: Boone Jenner is named the seventh captain in franchise history prior to the start of the season. He had been one of the team's alternate captains since the start of the 2015-16 campaign.

## [BlueJackets.com / Monahan, Marchenko help Blue Jackets hold off Avalanche](#)

By Ryan Boulding- October 13, 2024

DENVER -- Sean Monahan, Kirill Marchenko and Yegor Chinakhov each had a goal and two assists, and the Columbus Blue Jackets held on for a 6-4 win against the Colorado Avalanche at Ball Arena on Saturday.

Adam Fantilli and Zach Werenski scored for the Blue Jackets (1-1-0), and Daniil Tarasov made 26 saves in his first start of the season.

"It's obviously nice to keep a lead, but to not sit back and just defend was exciting for us as a staff," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We stayed aggressive. We didn't risk a whole lot, but we didn't shut down and just go into a shell and just try to defend and block shots. Our guys still played the game the right way."

Nathan MacKinnon and Ross Colton each had a goal and an assist, and Cale Makar had two assists for the Avalanche (0-2-0). Alexandar Georgiev allowed three goals on nine shots before being replaced by Justus Annunen at 1:56 of the second period. Annunen stopped 11 of 13 shots in relief.

It was the second straight game Georgiev was pulled. He was replaced to begin the third period after allowing five goals on 16 shots in Colorado's 8-4 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights on Wednesday.

"I get that there's a level of frustration, but [Georgiev], he's our guy. He's our starter," Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said. "I have full faith that he has the ability, the talent, the work ethic to bounce back and win us hockey games. It's a mental game right now."

Werenski gave the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead at 6:38 of the first period when he tapped in a centering pass from Chinakhov to finish off a 2-on-1 at the top of the crease.

Kent Johnson extended it to 2-0 at 7:45 after he cut down around the right face-off circle and scored on a snap shot short side over the shoulder of Georgiev.

"To be honest, it's emotional. It's nice. I mean, it's nice to get our first win," Monahan said. "You feel the love from this organization. I feel the love from my teammates, and obviously I can feel the love from [Johnny Gaudreau]."

MacKinnon cut it to 2-1 with a power-play goal at 19:52, locating a rebound off Tarasov's pad and burying a slap shot.

"It's frustrating because you go to work in camp and you want to have a good start to the season," Bednar said. "You do. You don't want to be digging holes and then trying to climb out of them, but it's a long year. Everyone wants to come out, put on a good show, play to their best ability in front of our fans. All understandable, but it felt like we had a whole season on our shoulders, and we're four periods into the season."

Fantilli pushed it 3-1 at 1:56 of the second period when he took the puck down around the right face-off dot and scored on a wrist shot five-hole.

Miles Wood made it 3-2 just 15 seconds later, one-timing a pass from Parker Kelly through Kelly's screen far side.

Casey Mittelstadt tied it 3-3 at 3:32 on the power play. He backhanded Makar's point shot after Columbus defenseman Erik Gudbranson deflected it.

"We got leaders and accrued leaders that have won, and it stings in here when we lose. We're not used to it," Colorado defenseman Devon Toews said. "It's something that we don't like to do. We hate losing more than anything. So if we're able to learn and move on and trust the process of getting better every day, we'll come out on top."

Marchenko put the Blue Jackets back ahead 4-3 at 4:33 after his one-timer from the right circle caromed off the leg of Annunen and in.

"I think we just feel synergy a little bit, and we talk a lot on the ice and off ice too," Marchenko said of his line. "We just try to communicate and find a good way for all [of] us three."

Chinakhov made it 5-3 at 9:49 with a wrist shot that went in off Annunen.

"I think [it's a] good thing, good feeling for us, because we have all four lines [that] can score," Marchenko said. "We have a lot of moments if we will score, like every line every night, we will win, for sure."

Colton cut it to 5-4 at 18:40 of the third period on a one-timer in front.

Monahan scored a power-play goal into an empty net with 12 seconds remaining for the 6-4 final.

NOTES: Werenski and Johnson became the eighth and ninth players in Blue Jackets history to score in each of the first two games of a season. It is the second time multiple players achieved the feat in the same season for Columbus (Cam Atkinson and Artem Anisimov in 2014-15). ... Avalanche forward Ivan Ivan assisted on MacKinnon's goal for his first NHL point.

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets get victory No. 1 on the season](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- October 13, 2024

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

BLUE JACKETS 6, AVALANCHE 4

### **1. We have to start with the donkey.**

Sean Monahan emerged from the Blue Jackets locker room to do his postgame interview with Bally Sports Ohio donning a gray donkey hat. With floppy ears, a Blue Jackets logo on one side and the Blue Jackets "13" patch in honor of Johnny Gaudreau on the other, the donkey is replacing the kepi hat given in the locker room to the team's player of the game for the time being.

"If you knew John, he probably called you a donkey 1,000 times," Monahan told Dave Maetzold on the Bally broadcast. "It's something we're doing for him. ... I think he's probably looking down laughing at me right now."

It was fitting Monahan earned the hat considering Gaudreau was one of his best friends and one of the major reasons he signed as a free agent with Columbus this offseason. He earned it with a standout performance that included his first CBJ goal, two assists and a plus-3 rating.

"To be honest, it's emotional," Monahan said. "It's nice. It's nice to get our first win. You feel the love from this organization, I feel the love from my teammates. And obviously I can feel the love from John."

The icing on the cake – perhaps literally – is that it came on Monahan's 30th birthday. He became the first CBJ player in team history with at least three points on their birthday.

### **2. Monahan scored the goal into an empty-net to ice the victory, and he did so because linemate Kirill Marchenko did the unselfish thing and passed him the puck rather than score himself.**

That gesture certainly didn't go unnoticed.

"Those kind of moments tell us here is a really good group and we take care of each other," goalie Daniil Tarasov said postgame. "We're fighting for each other. It means a lot."

Head coach Dean Evason has spoken repeatedly during the preseason about how close the team is, and this seemed to be another data point in favor of that.

"That's what makes the team a team," Monahan said.

For his part, Marchenko said he saw Monahan coming and elected to give up the puck.

"It's just a normal thing, I think, on our line," Marchenko said. "If I can make a pass, for sure."

### **3. When it comes to holding a lead after the second period, consider the first test complete.**

The Blue Jackets were 18-1-7 when leading after two periods a season ago, and those eight losses were one off the league lead in that realm. There were other games when the team took a lead in the third only to see it disappear in the final moments, costing the squad valuable points -- and confidence -- as the year went on.

Those blown leads could be considered part of what happens when a young team is trying to learn how to win games, but those lessons are still not very enjoyable to live through.

The hope is closing out this one against a dangerous Colorado team will be a boost.

"It's obviously nice to keep a lead, but to not sit back and just defend was exciting for us as a staff," head coach Dean Evason said. "We stayed aggressive. We didn't risk a whole lot, but we didn't shut down and just go into a shell and just try to defend and block shots. Our guys still played the game the right way. We still got a few things to correct out at the end there, but for the most part, we were very happy with that area."

Colorado had an 18-9 edge in shot attempts at 5-on-5 in the third, but only 6-4 in shots on goal and the Blue Jackets had a 2-1 edge in high-danger chances, according to Natural Stat Trick. Total shots on goal in the frame were 8-7 CBJ, and Colorado didn't have a shot on goal until nearly 10 minutes were gone in the period.

As Evason said, there are some things to clean up, but the Blue Jackets got the job done.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Have Reasons To Be Optimistic

**By Jonathon Robson- October 12, 2024**

Given their results in the last few seasons, the tragic loss of Johnny Gaudreau, and the lack of major additions to the core group, it is easy to see why predictions have the Columbus Blue Jackets finishing in the basement of the NHL standings.

The Athletic's model has the Blue Jackets finishing with just 68.6 points (from 'Columbus Blue Jackets 2024-25 season preview: Playoff chances, projected points, roster rankings', The Athletic, 9/30/2024). However, there are reasons to believe that the team will outperform the models and could provide fans with a competitive and entertaining season. If things go really well, the Blue Jackets could find themselves competing for a playoff spot in March or April.

### **Growth From Blue Jackets' Young Guns**

The organization has added a lot of talent in the last few drafts. While players like James Malatesta and Denton Mateychuck will continue to grow in the American Hockey League (at least for now), others look ready to take big steps forward. One player who looks ready to take a giant leap forward this season is Kent Johnson.

Johnson was noticeable throughout training camp and made his mark in the season opener with a goal and an assist. After a tough sophomore season, he signed a "prove-it" contract this summer and has taken it to heart. With more growth and development, Johnson could easily put up a 50+-point season after scoring 40 points as a rookie in 2022-23.

Other young players who are hoping to show progress in 2024-25 are Adam Fantilli and Kirill Marchenko. Fantilli was buzzing around all preseason and has already started to show the star player he should become. Columbus would love to see him force his way into the top-line center role by the end of the campaign, while Marchenko will look to score 30+ goals after reaching 44 goals in 137 games over the last two seasons. On top of these two players, Cole Sillinger, David Jiricek, and Yegor Chinakhov will also be looking to grow into more productive and well-rounded NHLers this year.

A player's development is difficult to predict since it's never linear. But if the Blue Jackets can see some nice jumps forward from most of their young talent, they will win more games than many have predicted. The future is very bright in Columbus, and it may not be as far away as some think.

### **Dean Evason's Coaching Impact**

Arguably, the biggest boost to the team this offseason was hiring Dean Evason. After watching a coaching carousel for the last few years, the Blue Jackets hope to have found their man in the former Minnesota Wild head coach. Since John Tortorella, the team hasn't had a head coach with any previous NHL experience, let alone success. Brad Larsen and Pascal Vincent were both promoted from the assistant coach position. But taking over the helm of a rebuilding roster proved too much for either of them to find success.

After Don Waddell was brought in as the new general manager, he made it apparent that experience would be a key factor in who the organization hired as their next head coach. After a patient search, Waddell announced on July 23, 2024, that Evason would be the next head coach for the Blue Jackets.

His attitude and approach have already earned him praise from his players. However, more noticeable are the changes in the style and system he's made on the ice. The defensemen are free to activate and engage in the offensive zone. Multiple times in the season opener versus the Wild, a defenseman was



seen carrying the puck into the offensive zone and trying to make a play with it. They also didn't rush back to the point but stayed low in the play even after the puck left their stick.

This new approach will greatly benefit some of the more offensively gifted defensemen, none more than Zach Werenski. The star blueliner was excellent against Minnesota and generated quite a few rushes. This offensive freedom could allow him to have a career year in points.

The Blue Jackets have also become much more aggressive all over the ice. They were buzzing around, finishing checks, and harassing puck carriers all night. While only one game, this will likely become a key component of the team's identity and felt reminiscent of the teams coached by Tortorella in the past. Being tough to play against was also Evason's hallmark in five seasons with the Wild. With these new changes, the Blue Jackets should be a more consistent and competitive team night after night.

### **Goaltending Improvements**

The team has been brutal in allowing goals over the last two seasons. For the Blue Jackets to have any hope of improving their record from last year, they have to do a better job of keeping the puck out of their net. While many are skeptical about the Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov tandem, there are reasons to believe they will improve in 2024-25. For one, the defensive structure in front of them should be vastly superior to previous years. While the goalie is the last line of defense, he certainly isn't the only line. The forwards and defensemen should be better in front of the net this year, and the team should spend more time in the offensive zone, which will help.

But even with their warts, both goalies have shown their potential. Under Tortorella, Merlikins put up a .923 save percentage (SV%) and 2.35 goals-against average (GAA) in 2019-20 and .916 SV% and 2.77 GAA in 2020-21. Tarasov had some great moments last season while putting up a .908 SV% and 3.18 GAA. The biggest problem for both of them is their ability to stay healthy. If Merlikins can return to his early career form and they both stay healthy, the Blue Jackets should see a noticeable improvement in goals against.

### **Hope for 2024-25 NHL Season and Beyond**

While it is easy to write off Columbus as a lottery team, there are reasons to believe they can outperform expectations. The combination of young talent, solid veterans, an experienced coach, and improved goaltending could surprise a lot of teams. They will be looking to make every night difficult for their opponent. Could they make the playoffs? It may not be likely, but it is more possible than most are giving them credit for. Will it require a lot of things to go right? Absolutely. But there is no reason to think this won't be a fun season no matter the outcome.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' First Road Trip Gives Glimpse of Brighter Future

**By Mark Scheig- October 14, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets went on the road to start their 2024-25 season. With games against the Minnesota Wild and Colorado Avalanche, it wasn't going to be easy for the visitors to win given it was each respective team's home openers.

Not only did the Blue Jackets play well in both games, they earned a split. A case could even be made they played well enough to win both games.

For as much as the Blue Jackets are going through, coming home from that road trip 1-1 is impressive. They played the games without their captain Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov. Then early on Saturday night, they played most of the game without Zach Aston-Reese who took a high hit early in the first period.

If the Blue Jackets were going to have success, several things had to go right. In these first two games, they did go right for the most part. The biggest part of this was the performance of their talented youth.

### Kent Johnson Shined

One of the biggest questions coming into the new season from a purely hockey perspective was who would step up offensively? The Blue Jackets' hope was pinned on their talented youth to make important contributions.

Thursday night in Minnesota, Kent Johnson answered the call. With the score 1-0 Wild in the second period, the Blue Jackets were able to tie the game early in the period.

Johnson skated the puck into the zone and was able to connect on a pass with Mikael Pyyhtia. This led to extended possession. A couple of won battles later, the game was tied.

Johnson was able to find the puck in a crowd, spin, shoot and score. It was the kind of goal that showed what these new look Blue Jackets were all about.

The Wild had multiple guys around the puck at different times. It didn't matter. Thanks to the efforts of the line and in particular Cole Sillinger, the play stayed alive. It was the pressure on the puck that created this goal.

The line of Pyyhtia, Sillinger and Johnson are ages of 22, 21 and 21 respectively. Johnson wasn't done either on that night. He factored in on Zach Werenski's power-play goal to cut it to 3-2 late.

For Johnson, it was one of his most complete games as a pro. He played 18:05 and was a factor in all zones. He also played both special-teams units in the process. While the Blue Jackets had multiple chances to tie the game, they fell short. But it was Johnson's effort in part that allowed them to be in a position to tie. What would he do for an encore?

Saturday night in Denver, Johnson led all Blue Jackets' forwards in ice time. He played 21:30 including 2:55 shorthanded. He's now showing the propensity of wanting the puck on his stick at all times in all situations. He added a goal in the first period from a wide angle that was labeled.

What was even more impressive about Johnson's goal was how he created it. He took a pass from Jake Christiansen and then did the rest.

From center ice, Johnson entered the zone and drove wide. This created confusion amongst the Avalanche on how to defend the play. Then from the wide angle, he went high on Alex Georgiev. That made goals in consecutive games to start the new season for a guy GM Don Waddell called an important part of the Blue Jackets' future.

#### Other Youth Shined Too

While Johnson did his thing, others stepped up too. Zach Werenski scored in each of the two games. Don't forget he's only 27. He scored a power-play goal in Minnesota and then opened the scoring in Denver on a play where he drove the net and finished a great pass from Yegor Chinakhov.

Speaking of Chinakhov, his line with Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko dominated Saturday night. Each member of the line had 1-2-3.

While Werenski opened the scoring and Monahan closed the scoring with an empty-net goal, it was the four Blue Jackets' goals scored in the middle that stood out. Who scored them?

Kent Johnson (21)

Adam Fantilli (turned 20 on Saturday)

Kirill Marchenko (24)

Yegor Chinakhov (23)

The average age of these four goal scorers is 22. Waddell said before the season that the youth would get a big opportunity to play important minutes. It's very early, but Saturday night showed a glimpse of what these Blue Jackets hope to become in the future.

Even in a 3-3 game Saturday night, the Blue Jackets held right in. They took the lead thanks to Marchenko's goal. It was a lead they kept for the rest of the game. That's the other big takeaway from this mini road trip that needs highlighted.

#### Evason's Impact

One of the biggest x-factors coming into the season was how new head coach Dean Evason would impact things. The early reviews are overwhelmingly positive on that front.

The Blue Jackets played perhaps one of their best 5-on-5 games in a long time Thursday night. They dominated possession. They looked fast. More importantly, they were positionally sound and knew what to do on the next play in most cases.

The Blue Jackets of the past couple seasons struggled mightily on that front. Many times, they couldn't make an easy play. It seemed they didn't know what to do once they got the puck.

Under Evason, there is decisiveness. There is pressure in all zones. There's quick puck movement north. Although Thursday resulted in a loss thanks to a couple key mistakes, it was the kind of game that gave optimism about the future. If the team plays like that consistently, better days are ahead.

While the Avalanche scored four, they held the Avalanche to just 30 shots. Given how often they'd allow 40 or more shots in a game, having this kind of performance is noteworthy. In a 5-3 game most of the third period, the Blue Jackets outshot the Avalanche 8-7.

While the way Evason wants the Blue Jackets to play is still a work in progress, the early results are clearly visible. They look much more organized and in control than at any point the last two seasons.

Teams often take on the personality of their head coach. For the Blue Jackets, they have taken Evason's message to heart and are applying it to their game. The win Saturday marked Evason's first as the Blue Jackets' head coach.

It's just two games so you don't want to go too crazy yet. However it's hard to walk away from the games and not think the Blue Jackets may be onto something. The right track is often a long road. They need to start somewhere though.

The Blue Jackets took care of business and earned a split in a pair of hostile environments. They are laying the foundation for what they want to become. Their youth led the way offering a glimpse of better days ahead.

Werenski recently said that this season has to be successful for them, no matter what it looks like. If they have more nights like Thursday and Saturday, the Blue Jackets will make the most out of this challenging season.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Lose Emotional Season Opener In Minnesota

**By Jason Newland- October 12, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets went to Minnesota to play their first game without their superstar Johnny Gaudreau. They would lose the game 3-2.

The Blue Jackets got the first game out of the way, now they can play hockey.

Kent Johnson scored the Blue Jackets' first goal of the season two minutes into the second period to tie the game at one. Zach Werenski scored a power-play goal at 17:06 of the third to bring Columbus to within one goal, but that would be it. The Jackets would fall 3-2 despite a late flurry of shots and scoring chances.

The CBJ didn't play terribly in this game and had a chance to tie it at the end. It wasn't the prettiest game by either team, but a fun game against their expansion cousins.

On to Colorado.

### **Final Stats**

#### **Players Stats**

Kent Johnson had a goal and an assist, played 18:05, and had 4 shots.

Zach Werenski scored his first goal of the season, a power-play goal. He also had 7 shots.

Cole Sillinger had an assist and 2 hits.

Yegor Chinakhov had an assist and led all forwards with over 20 minutes of ice time.

Damon Severson had an assist and 2 blocked shots.

Sean Monahan had 4 giveaways in his CBJ debut.

Elvis Merzljikins stopped 23 of 26 Wild shots.

#### **Team Stats**

The Jackets went 1/3 on the power play.

Columbus stopped 2 of 3 Wild power plays.

The CBJ won 47.5% of their faceoffs.

**What's Next** - Columbus travels to Colorado to face the Avalanche on Saturday at 9 PM EST.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Wins A Wild Game In Colorado To Pick Up Their First Win Of The Season

**By Jason Newland- October 13, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets walked into Ball Arena and beat the Colorado Avalanche

Zach Werenski(2), Kent Johnson(2), Adam Fantilli(1), Kirill Marchenko(1), Yegor Chinakhov(1), and Sean Monahan(1) all scored for Columbus, while Daniil Tarasov stopped 26 shots in the CBJ win.

The Jackets came out swinging, scoring two goals in the first 8 minutes, but you just knew the powerful Avalanche would come storming back at some point. Columbus held a two-goal lead three different times, and each time Colorado came back to tie it.

It wasn't until Sean Monahan's empty netter with 12 seconds left in the game could fans take a breath. Kirill Marchenko's unselfish play while he and Monahan were streaking toward the empty net led to him getting his first goal as a Blue Jacket. Monahan said after the game, "That's what makes a team a team."

Despite two power-play goals from the Avs, the Jackets were able to go into Ball Arena and take it to the struggling Avalanche.

The first two games of the season have been exciting to watch.

### **Final Stats**

#### **Players Stats**

Zach Werenski scored his second goal of the season. He also had 3 shots and 25:55 TOI.

Kent Johnson scored his 2nd goal of the season, and now has 3 points through two games. He led forwards in TOI with 21:30.

Adam Fantilli scored his first goal of the season.

Kirill Marchenko had a goal and two assists.

Yegor Chinakhov had a goal and two assists. He now has four points through two games.

Sean Monahan had a goal and two assists.

Daniil Tarasov stopped 26 of 30 Avalanche shots,

#### **Team Stats**

The CBJ power play went 1/3

The Jackets PK could only stop 2 of the 4 Avalanche power plays.

They went 43.8% at the faceoff circle.

The team had 19 blocked shots.

**What's Next** - The Jackets will have their home opener on Tuesday against the Florida Panthers at Nationwide Arena.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Kent Johnson's Strong Preseason Carried Over Into Season Opener For Blue Jackets

**By Will Chase- October 12, 2024**

Among the things you're looking for from the Columbus Blue Jackets this season is strong play from their core.

Kent Johnson was a healthy scratch in the Blue Jackets' season opener one year ago when they played the Philadelphia Flyers. He found himself in Cleveland by November before being recalled by Columbus, and then a labrum injury ended his season in February.

Turning the page to this season, No. 91 is looking to do just that. And so far, it seems to be paying dividends.

After a strong training camp that's drawn rave reviews from new head coach Dean Evason and an exhibition slate that saw him score six points (two goals, four assists) in four games, the strong play and point production carried over into Thursday's season opener at the Minnesota Wild.

At 2:00 of the second period, Johnson's tally tied the game at 1-1. Cole Sillinger and Damon Severson picked up assists on the play.

Johnson added his second point of the game at 17:06 of the third period when Zach Werenski scored on the power play to pull the Jackets within one goal, making it a 3-2 game. Yegor Chinakhov added an assist as well.

"It always feels good when you're playing your game and feeling good," Johnson said after Thursday's loss. For the game, he played 18:05 and was one of four players with at least four shots on goal — Sean Monahan and Jake Christiansen each had four while Zach Werenski had seven — and Johnson had 1:58 ice time on the power play and 0:54 on the penalty kill.

"Credit to the boys, they're doing a great job finding me," Johnson said.

Beyond what showed up on the scoreboard during preseason and in training camp, is it what Johnson worked on over the summer that's paying off now?

"Yeah, I think it's different system, too, where I could go in the O-zone," Johnson said. "I think I'm finding my spots I want to get a little bit better and try to really make it a focus. Like I said the (defense) and Cole (Sillinger) is my center, he's getting me the puck a lot, so it's great," Johnson said.

Evason liked what he saw from Johnson.

"Skating ability is just out of this world, obviously," Evason said. "He's getting up and down the ice very confident. He's playing extremely well."

The Blue Jackets will need more of the same from Johnson and the club as a whole as they play the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday night.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Hard-Fought, A New Era Under Way, Can't Solve Gustavsson

By Will Chase- October 12, 2024

Game No. one of 82 is in the books in the Dean Evason era. The first win will have to come another day.

Matt Boldy had three points (one goal, two assists) and Joel Eriksson Ek and Matts Zuccarello scored to lift the Minnesota Wild 3-2 over the Columbus Blue Jackets on Thursday night at Xcel Energy Center.

Filip Gustavsson made 31 saves for the Wild. Marcus Johansson had two assists. Jonas Brodin and Kirill Kaprizov each had an assist.

Kent Johnson had two points with a goal and an assist and Zach Werenski scored for Columbus. Elvis Merzlikins made 23 saves. Cole Sillinger, Damon Severson, and Yegor Chinakhov had assists for Columbus.

Hard-Fought

In what goes down as a loss in the standings, it was an entertaining game between both clubs.

COLUMBUS		MINNESOTA
33	SHOTS	26
45.8%	FACEOFF %	54.2%
1 / 3	POWER PLAY	1 / 3
2 / 3	PENALTY KILL	2 / 3
20	HITS	14
15	GIVEAWAYS	11
1	TAKEAWAYS	2
8	BLOCKED SHOTS	18

DATA VIA ESPN

Matt Boldy's tally at 17:51 of the first period broke the scoreless tie for Minnesota. Kent Johnson's first of the year at 2:00 of the second period tied the game at 1-1.

With 9:36 remaining in the second period, the Jackets thought they had a 2-1 lead thanks to recent newcomer James van Riemsdyk on the power play, but a successful challenge to review goaltender interference by the Wild erased the goal.

Eriksson Ek scored at 16:35, just as the Wild's power play ended to give the Wild a 2-1 lead through 40 minutes. Zuccarello's goal at 9:58 of the third period extended the two-goal lead.

With 17:06 remaining in the third period, Werenski scored on the power play to give Columbus a chance to the very end.

It's nice to see the power play come away with a goal — almost two — as the team pushes forward.

A New Era Under Way



If there's an identity to watch for from this team under new head coach Dean Evason, it's work ethic. That's been among the common words and traits Evason has stressed in the early-going of his coaching tenure in Columbus when talking about what he expects from his team.

In the first game of 82, there was a lot to like in that department, while the Jackets certainly have some areas to clean up as most teams do at the beginning of a new season.

"We didn't get the result, which we're not happy with obviously, but we got the effort, we got the work, we got the visual of how we want to play, the reinforcement of how we want to play," Evason said after Thursday's loss.

#### Can't Solve Gustavsson

One of the best players for the Wild was their goaltender, Gustavsson, who did what he could to thwart the best players for the Blue Jackets.

Johnson led Columbus with two points including the game-tying goal in the second period. He played 18:04 and was one of four Blue Jackets with at least four shots on goal (Sean Monahan and Jake Christiansen each had four), and Werenski led the game with seven shots on 11 attempts.

#### Mile High

The mini two-game road trip concludes on Saturday, Oct. 12 when the Blue Jackets take on the Colorado Avalanche at 9:00 p.m. ET from Ball Arena.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Game Day 2: Blue Jackets Look To Build Off Thursday's Play, Battle Avalanche Saturday Night

By Ed Francis- October 12, 2024

Columbus is making just one change to the lineup Saturday night against Colorado — Daniil Tarasov gets the start when the Blue Jackets take on the Avalanche.

COLORADO AVALANCHE

SATURDAY, OCT. 12

9:00 P.M.

BALL ARENA

DENVER, CO

COLORADO:

0-1-0 (0 pts; .000%)

t-6th, Central Division

A moral victory isn't worth two points, but it would be more than fair to suggest that the Columbus Blue Jackets bested the expectations of many in Thursday night's season opener against the Minnesota Wild in St. Paul.

They lost — 3-2 was the final — but as Zach Werenski said after the game, it was a good starting point.

"I feel like our body of work in that game and how we played ... if that's our standard, we're going to win a lot of hockey games," said Werenski.

He's right. The Blue Jackets outplayed the Wild for long stretches of the game, particularly the second period — a notoriously weak spot for Columbus over the last number of seasons. They had several opportunities to tie it late but were turned away by Wild goalie Filip Gustavsson.

So in advance of Tuesday's sure-to-be emotional home opener, the Blue Jackets will have another chance to come back to Columbus with a win in hand. They face the Colorado Avalanche in what is their home opener at 9:00 p.m. Saturday night:

Here's what to know when the Blue Jackets drop the puck in Denver:

CBJ	SEASON STATS	COL
2.00	t-22nd GOALS FOR	4.00 t-5th
3.00	t-17th GOALS AGAINST	8.00 32nd
33.3%	t-5th POWER PLAY	33.3% t-5th
66.7%	t-21st PENALTY KILL	33.3% t-28th
33.0	5th SHOTS FOR	32.0 t-6th

26.0 t-10th SHOTS AGAINST 21.0 t-3rd

### COLRADO'S LAST THREE GAMES

WED, 10/9 @ Golden Knights L, 8-4

### COLORADO'S TEAM LEADERS

GOALS Mikko Rantanen 3

ASSISTS Nathan MacKinnon Cale Makar Samuel Girard 2

POINTS Mikko Rantanen 3

### ODDS & PROJECTIONS

CBJ WIN PER MONEYPUCK: 24%

BETESPN ODDS: CBJ +260

### WHAT TO KNOW:

Daniil Tarasov gets the start between the pipes. Head coach Dean Evason didn't say whether or not that was the plan all the way through, but it would be reasonable to assume that with no clear #1, a rotation would be the norm to start the season. Elvis Merzlikins looked fine Thursday.

One glaring difference between this season and last: players were allowed to make mistakes, go up in the zone when appropriate, and were free to play with an aggressive head. This was the expectation under Evason, but to see it play out in real time was a refreshing change of pace. Young guys got time to do their thing, as well. Included in that group: Yegor Chinakhov, who was bumped to the first line after the injury to Boone Jenner, skated for more than 20 minutes (20:48) for just the third time in his career.

Jake Christiansen on the second defensive pairing and Mikael Pyhtia playing 15:50 on the third line may not have been on anyone's BINGO card over the summer, but both youngsters who saw elevated roles Thursday showed why they got it. Pyhtia, in particular, made high-IQ decisions repeatedly in the opener and was tied with Erik Gudbranson for the team lead in hits, at three.

Forwards and defensive pairings are identical to Thursday. This worked well for long stretches of the game, and no line stood out as particularly poor. Evason will surely make adjustments early in the season, but liked what he saw in the opener well enough to do it again in Denver. Full line projections:

LW		C		RW
59	Yegor Chinakhov	23	Sean Monahan 82	Kirill Marchenko
21	James van Riemsdyk	19	Adam Fantilli 62	Kevin Labanc
82	Mikael Pyhtia	4	Cole Sillinger 91	Kent Johnson
27	Zach Aston-Reese	7	Sean Kuraly 24	Mathieu Olivier

LD

8 Zach Werenski  
2 Jake Christiansen  
3 Jack Johnson

RD

9 Ivan Provorov  
78 Damon Severson  
44 Erik Gudbranson

Starting Goalie

40 Daniil Tarasov

Back-Up Goalie

90 Elvis Merzlikins

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Big Dub: Six Blue Jackets Score; Columbus Takes Down Colorado 6-4 For First Win Of The Season

By Ed Francis- October 13, 2024

Six different Blue Jackets scored Saturday night in Colorado against the Avalanche, giving Columbus their first win of the season by a final of 6-4.

There it is.

After a tough loss in Minnesota on Thursday's season opener, the Columbus Blue Jackets again played well enough to win Saturday night against the Colorado Avalanche.

This time, the result went Columbus' way.

Six different Blue Jackets scored, including birthday boys Adam Fantilli and Sean Monahan, as they defeated Colorado 6-4 to give head coach Dean Evason his first win as the Columbus bench boss.

Here's how it all went down:

	1	2	3	F
CBJ	2	3	1	6
COL	1	2	1	4

GOALS: Werenski, Johnson, Fantilli,

Marchenko, Chinakhov, Monahan

ASSISTS: Chinakhov (2), Marchenko (2),

Monahan (2), Christiansen, Labanc,

Severson, Tarasov

### **1st Period**

(6:38 — 1-0 CBJ): Another night, another Zach Werenski goal. The defenseman got the scoring started early, capitalizing on a great look from Yegor Chinakhov on a rush to make it 1-0 Blue Jackets. This was another example of Evason allowing his defenseman to jump up into the play in this new, aggressive style of Columbu style.

(7:45 — 2-0 CBJ): Another night, another Kent Johnson goal too. Beautiful work here as he goes from behind his own blue line to near Colorado goalie Alexandar Georgiev and beats the Avalanche netminder glove side to make it 2-0 Columbus. Johnson was on the ice for 21:30 in the win — the most of any Blue Jackets forward.

COLUMBUS		COLORADO
23	SHOTS	30
43.8%	FACEOFF %	56.3%

1 / 3	POWER PLAY	2 / 4
2 / 4	PENALTY KILL	2 / 3
7	HITS	26
13	GIVEAWAYS	11
8	TAKEAWAYS	10
19	BLOCKED SHOTS	13

DATA VIA ESPN

(19:52 — 2-1 CBJ): Colorado cuts the lead to 2-1 in the final seconds of the opening frame while on a power play after a Cole Sillinger tripping penalty. Nathan MacKinnon gets the goal for the Avs.

### 2nd Period

(1:56 — 3-1 CBJ): Columbus very briefly restores their two-goal lead with the birthday boy picking up his first one of the season. Adam Fantilli (who turned all of 20 years old Saturday) gets the goal with a couple of unique assists: Kevin Labanc with the primary, his first point as a Blue Jacket, and Daniil Tarasov, who got his second career assist with the secondary apple.

(2:11 — 3-2 CBJ): That two goal lead was brief — very brief. Tarasov has some trouble locating the puck after a wrap-around attempt by Colorado's Calvin de Haan and Miles Wood capitalizes to make it a 3-2 lead just 15 seconds after the Blue Jackets tally.

(3:42 — Tied 3-3): Another power play goal for the Avalanche, this time with Damon Severson in the box for a slash. Casey Mittelstadt cleans up on a redirect to tie it at 3-3.

(4:33 — 4-3 CBJ): The fourth goal in less than three minutes would restore the Columbus lead, with Kirill Marchenko sweeping a shot that would trickle past Georgiev to make it 4-3 Blue Jackets; a lead the Blue Jackets would not give up. This was the first of three points on the night for Marchenko.

(9:49 — 5-3 CBJ): Marchenko's second point of the night is an assist on a Yegor Chinakhov goal. Both Chinakhov and Monahan had good looks, but it's the 23-year-old who gets the goal to allow Columbus to regain a two-goal lead.

### 3rd Period

(18:40 — 5-4 CBJ): After a relatively calm third period, a moment of trepidation as the Avalanche cut it to one with the goalie pulled. Ross Colton had the goal. This would be as close as Colorado would get on the scoreboard — but Colton would hit a goalpost in his next shift that was an inch away from tying the game.

(19:48 — 6-4 CBJ): Marchenko's third point of the night is also the third point of the night for Chinakhov and Monahan — this time a selfless play from Marchenko, getting the puck to Monahan to put the game away and give Monahan his first goal as a Blue Jacket on his birthday.

### Next Up

Unquestionably, the most emotional home opener in franchise history. The Blue Jackets battle the Florida Panthers with a start that's scheduled for just after 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday. Before the game, the team will honor the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

## The Hockey Writers / Cleveland Monsters Season-Opening Q&A With Head Coach Trent Vogelhuber

By Mark Scheig- October 13, 2024

The Cleveland Monsters open the 2024-25 AHL season at the same place their 2023-24 season ended. The emotions from that still linger around those that were part of that amazing Eastern Conference Final.

The Monsters will play the Calder-Cup Champion Hershey Bears. The Bears will lift another banner to the rafters at Giant Center before the game with Cleveland on hand to witness it. Motivation to defeat the Bears shouldn't be hard to find.

After an intense training camp in Columbus, the Monsters and their staff are ready to embark on the new season which is filled with excitement all over their lineup. It's also full of questions too. It should make for an interesting season up I-71 on the shores of Lake Erie.

Head coach Trent Vogelhuber sat down with the Hockey Writers for an exclusive season-opening Q&A. We touched on a lot of topics from who stood out at Blue Jackets' camp to how they develop plans for individual players and much more. We wrap up our conversation by discussing why the 2024-25 season has the potential to be very exciting.

Here is our 20-minute conversation.

### **Trent Vogelhuber Q&A**

THW: Trent, now that you've got the semblance of a team in Cleveland, just how was your training camp different compared to the stuff that was going on in Blue Jackets camp?

Vogelhuber: "Definitely more hands on my part. I make a point to be a little bit more standoffish, just a resource for guys at the Columbus camp. Nobody wants to get too cozy with the American League coach when they're at the NHL camp, which I completely understand and aware of. When guys get here, I'm able to take the reins and be a little bit more hands on. And this week's honestly been a little bit more difficult in that sense just with the guys coming in and out, and we haven't been able to do a ton of team stuff. We've had five guys on the ice some days, seven on the next, 11 back to five. It's been a little bit in and out but overall, definitely more hands-on involved."

THW: From my point of view, a guy like Luca Del Bel Belluz, a guy like James Malatesta, certainly others, stood out where it was plainly obvious that they had made strides in their development. Just from your point of view Trent, who really stood out to you just from the time that you guys departed from Hershey (last season) until you got back up here?

Vogelhuber: "I think the first name you mentioned which was Luca Del Bel Belluz. He's come a long way from a kid that to be honest organizationally, we weren't sure if he was going to do his year back in junior or not. I really liked some of the things I saw from him last year in camp, so I was pushing to have him on our roster. He did not disappoint. And I think just from where he started a year ago til now, we made it clear to him throughout last season and this summer the things he needed to improve on.

Strength and explosiveness being at the top of that list. He's taken everything we've said seriously and been all on board with our plan for him as far as the strength training and took it to heart this summer. We're still going to work on foot speed. He's not the fastest guy on the ice in the NHL. That's okay. But

I've seen him hold off people and protect pucks. (His) confidence as well with that strength and preparation has shot through the roof. I think he's done a great job.

Malatesta is another guy who's come a long way. His is different. I think he's got the strength and explosiveness down. It's just the awareness of the constant detail that you have to have in your game at the pro level, certainly in the NHL, which I've seen him make improvements on. None of them are finished products, but on the right trajectory for sure. Another kid on the forward side, Hunter McCown, who was a free agent signing undrafted, but I thought just one area that I love to see from him is his consistent competitiveness was not at the level it needed to be when he turned pro. And it was probably until All-Star break where it looked like it clicked to him as far as the level that he has to battle at. It popped off the ice for me in training camp and some of the games. Just the hard nose-ish power forward mindset that he's brought has been a huge improvement, and I'd love to see that from those three guys.

On the defensive side, I don't know if there's somebody that's popped off for me in that sense, but I just think guys have steadily come along. I've loved Cole Clayton. He was huge for us last year. He doesn't look out of place in those NHL games. He's worked himself into being an NHL prospect where he was on an American League deal, which is what it's all about for us. It's come a long way. And then we've got younger guys like Stanislav Svozil and (Corson) Ceulemans who have definitely improved over the summer with strength and fitness, which is another big part of their program that we're working on with them but I think still have a ways to go, We're going to continue to work but they're on the right track."

THW: You brought up Luca earlier, and he's a great example about how you guys develop a plan for a specific player. He was going to have a gym routine. He was only going to play certain games, and then it ended up being more. What all actually goes into developing a plan? Who else is involved with that planning process when it comes to an individual player?

Vogelhuber: "We take the feedback from the NHL GMs and coaches for sure of what they're seeing and we're a part of that. So those guys lay the foundation at the end of the training camp meeting on things they think they need to work on. And then myself, our coaching staff, along with Chris Clark, our GM, and our strength coach Ben Eaves is in on those meetings that we have with individual players when we start. We identify the areas that they need to improve. So (Luca) was a pretty easy one with the strength. And that's something we could really control how we hit those areas in the gym. And Eaves is much more involved in something like that.

And then I'll go to James Malatesta where it's some of the consistent winning details away from the puck. With that, we make sure we hit video a little bit more and schedule that almost weekly at the least to make sure we're touching some of those points, staying on it and driving them home. To answer your question, it's everybody collectively. I spearhead those kinds of schedules along with the help of many other people who then take it and run with it. But it's collective for sure. There's other people that we have that need to just improve their execution and puck touches. So we make sure multiple times a week that they're out there before practice with Ben Eaves our skills coach, one of our assistant coaches just doing touches and small-area skill stuff. We try to tailor it as much as we can to each individual player and make sure that it's not just something we're doing for the first two weeks of the season, that we can continue that during the dog days, when we get December, January and February as well."

THW: I know one of the big challenges you have as a coach, and Columbus has a lot to do with that, is the lineup and how you formulate that. There's obviously certain parameters that you have to consider, league rules, veteran minimums. But when there are certain guys that you want to play but there just might not be so much room, they're a healthy scratch. I wonder how do you get the most out of guys



that might not be playing all the time, but you keep them fresh and keep them ready? What is the challenge in all those lineup things you have to do?

Vogelhuber: "I think honesty is first and foremost. I don't have a ton to hide as far as why the decisions are being made. I think for the veteran players maybe that last year would miss games. They've been around long enough. They've been in the NHL, the American League and they understand where they're at in their career and what the purpose of this league is. They're for the NHL team. The primary purpose is to make sure that we have players ready to play in the NHL. I can be as honest as possible with those guys, give them feedback as to it's not necessarily a scratch or a play, but we have to make sure we're filtering guys in the lineup, primarily young players. Keep honest with that. That's been received well.

And on the other side of things with young players, we go through a progression with them of it's not just a scratch out of nowhere. It's giving them every opportunity to play themselves out of it, and whether it's a little bit less ice time in a video meeting as to why that happened and maybe a little bit of demotion on a pair or line. If it's not getting better, the ice time continues to go down. You hit another video meeting. You talk and then we communicate with our general manager in Columbus and get an okay that it might be time for them to watch a game. And then you just go through those progressions. It's not a straight, narrow path for everybody. We work through those and communicate, but I think the first and foremost thing is honesty.

I'll tell those young players; you don't deserve to be in the lineup tonight because we've done this and we haven't seen it improve. I think it's a great opportunity to use a setback. It's normal to go through these things, but to reset, watch from above, and we can come back and continue to improve. But I think honesty with players, communication within the organization from top to bottom on what we're doing and why, and then it doesn't need to be a bigger deal than it is. That's just what's best for the individual and the team."

THW: Trent, how do you feel like that your relationship with Chris Clark has evolved since you started working with him?

Vogelhuber: "I've got a long history with him for being a player when he was on the development staff. I think we are able to be honest with each other. (I'm) certainly more comfortable in the way that we communicate and understanding what we both need and want. I think it's progressed nicely. I'm very comfortable having those discussions with him, and I think he would say the same thing. I've known him for a long time. The trust is there. (We're) able to have those honest discussions when needed. I think it's in a healthy place."

THW: Where do you feel like that you have grown the most as a coach?

Vogelhuber: "I think everywhere. That's a loaded question. You just come in naive. There's so much more to it than just systematically and knowing the details of the game, which I felt confident in coming from a player to a coach. I just think personality management is a huge area that that I've learned just by watching coaches and just being through it and how to talk to players. Early on, it's not comfortable to have honest conversations when it's not what somebody wants to hear. I think you realize that it's better to have somebody be angry with you but have that respect for 48 hours than disliked forever because you beat around the bush. That's something that I've learned. It's so much easier to just hit somebody between the eyes with what is happening. In the long run, they'll respect you even if they disagree with you rather than trying to dance around feelings.

That's an area that I've certainly grown as well as just managing staff members and managing the group as a whole. There's a lot of non-hockey things that pop up in that regard. That's really what it is. It's no different than what you do or what a lot of other people do in their line of work. It's managing people

and understanding how to talk to different individuals and the buttons to push with certain people and with others. That's just an emotional intelligence thing that I think isn't just for hockey coaches. That's for everybody. And that's an area I think I've grown the most because systematically and detail wise, I felt comfortable with those. Have I improved and gotten more detailed and learned what I brought out of our team? Definitely. But I think the biggest growth has been in the other things that I mentioned."

THW: Mike Haviland is up in Columbus now. You have a new coach on your staff. What is the impact of having a new coach on your staff this season?

Vogelhuber: "Fortunately, I've known Chris Bergeron since my days at Miami (Ohio). I've stayed close with him for a long time ever since he recruited and coached me at college. That was one of the main reasons I wanted him here because he made a lasting impression on me and a lot of my teammates just in the relationship building side of things. I know what his strengths are and that's it. And to be honest, they're very similar to what Mike Haviland's strengths were. It's connecting with people, earning trust and being able to have those open lines of communication with respect. It's not just developing hockey players. It's building relationships with people that last far longer than just a season or a couple seasons. That was Havi's strength. That's Bergeron's strength. I think with our young players, that's the most important thing.

Going back to your previous question, it's not necessarily just the details of the game that are the most important. It's earning trust with these players so you can have honest conversations so they know you care about them. You can't pretend to try to act like you care about them. You have to actually care about them. Then it's organic and natural and that's what Bergeron does so well. He cares about his players. I'm a testament to that. I'm in touch with him and close to him 12 years after I graduated, and that's why I wanted him here."

THW: Trent, how much do the Blue Jackets ask for your input? And then how much do you feel like that they value your input when it comes to two or three guys perhaps deserve an opportunity, but they can only choose one?

Vogelhuber: "I haven't gone through that yet with Dean (Evason) or Don (Waddell). But in our discussions in Columbus, it seems like they will value my and our coaching staff's input very much. They want to make sure that they're getting the player that deserves it the most for the Blue Jackets. But they both understand that we're trying to build a team here as well and what it can do if you just pull who you think it should be rather than who deserves it and what that can do to a locker room here as well and the culture that we're trying to build. I think they're going to be very willing to hear what we have to say, take our opinions, and then ultimately, that's their decision. But they from what I understand and what it sounds like, they're going to be really honest with me and take our advice weighted pretty heavily, which is great."

THW: Trent, there's a palpable excitement around this team. Denton Mateychuk is with you. It's unfortunate with Gavin Brindley's broken finger. Once that rehab is done, he may end up joining you. Just how exciting is this Monsters' season going to be for you? How much potential is there?

Vogelhuber: "That's again, a loaded question. I'm very excited because I think right now, we've got guys a little bit dinged up already, which obviously isn't the way you want to start as a group or those individuals. Especially young guys like Gavin who want to get started on the right foot and come out flying. That's always disappointing for them. But I said this summer. I think just looking at the roster, it's arguably the most skilled roster I think I've been a part of here as far as prospects go. It's also undoubtedly the youngest. Somehow, we found a way from last year to this year to get younger. I'm obviously excited to work with these kids.

I also understand what first-year players go through and what second year players go through. There's going to be a learning curve. We have second-year players who now are not rookies anymore, and they're going to be expected to not just fall in line with the leaders and guys who've been around, but to drive the bus. That's a big step to take. That's what we're going to be pushing from them. We need those guys versus second year players for us to have success here to drive the bus and be impact players and take ownership of the team that they're on. And while that's exciting to work with these guys, it's going to be a lot of work for them and for us to get us to the spot where I thought we finished last year, where everybody was on the same page, pulling the rope, same direction, understanding their roles. All those things change. Players step into higher or bigger roles. I don't think it's going to be without adjustment and learning curves, but at the same time, the potential is very high with skill sets."

## The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 bold predictions: Breakout players, trades, offer sheets and 40-goal scorers

By The Athletic NHL Staff- October 13, 2024

Will the NHL's newest club finish as one of the highest-scoring teams in the league? Will Pierre-Luc Dubois finally find a long-term home with the Washington Capitals? Are players like Juraj Slafkovský going to make a significant jump in their production?

Those were among the responses The Athletic got this week when it asked its NHL staff for their bold predictions for the 2024-25 season.

Here's one prediction for each team as the early regular season continues.

### Anaheim Ducks

Trevor Zegras will not be traded this season: You want bold? How about running counter to the prevailing theory the Ducks are destined to move their mercurial 23-year-old forward? In the Pretend NHL (i.e., hockey social media), hasn't he been traded about 1,000 times? But it didn't make sense for Anaheim to deal Zegras after an injury-plagued 2023-24 season when his trade value took a hit. He'd do well to make this season one of vengeance, and the Ducks ought to at least try putting him in the best position to flourish. Now the "this season" qualifier is in there since he still has next year left on his contract and some kind of trade could get worked on next summer. General manager Pat Verbeek could go the Jamie Drysdale route with a big player-for-player swap, but the Ducks need more gifted offensive players, not fewer. Bonus bold prediction: Cutter Gauthier will win the Calder Trophy. You'll remember this when it's wrong but just do the same if it happens to be right. — Eric Stephens

### Boston Bruins

Jeremy Swayman will struggle early: Swayman missed all of training camp. He is entering his first season without Linus Ullmark as his partner. He has to deal with the pressure of being the fourth-highest-paid active goalie in the league. Thursday's four-goal start won't be the last hiccup. — Fluto Shinzawa

### Buffalo Sabres

Owen Power will double his previous high-goal total: Power hasn't scored more than six goals in a season during his short NHL career, but he looks poised for an uptick in that department. His shot is noticeably stronger this season as he added strength over the summer. The Sabres have also emphasized creating more traffic in front of the net. As a result, Power had two goals in the preseason and already has one in the regular season. A goal total of at least 12 isn't out of the question. — Matthew Fairburn

### Calgary Flames

Jonathan Huberdeau will crack the 80-point plateau: Huberdeau has 107 points combined over his last two seasons in Calgary. So, why the optimism around him? Partially because it cannot get any lower than his near-pointless month of December last season. Huberdeau played well after that, even if his season ended with fewer points than his debut Flames campaign. Another part is because the Flames are banking on his establishing chemistry with Anthony Mantha. They've played together most of, if not all, preseason and have shown flashes that they can be an ideal duo alongside Martin Pospisil. Huberdeau should also get his usual PP1 minutes to start the year. Finally, the pressure to succeed in Calgary is much lower compared with his first two seasons. — Julian McKenzie

## Carolina Hurricanes

Seth Jarvis will get a shot at center: The Hurricanes have their No. 1 center in Sebastian Aho, but finding a player to slot behind him has been difficult. Last year's Evgeny Kuznetsov acquisition flopped, and Jesperi Kotkaniemi has been unable to hold on to the job despite several chances. Jarvis has already proved to be one of the best defensive wingers in hockey, and something this season — ineffectiveness from Kotkaniemi and Jack Drury or an injury — will convince coach Rod Brind'Amour, at least in the short term, to give Jarvis a shot in the middle. — Cory Lavalette

## Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks will finish 25 points better than last season: The Blackhawks might end up being near the bottom of the league again, but they should do so with a much higher point total than their 52 last season. — Scott Powers

## Colorado Avalanche

Cale Makar will have 100 points: Only one defenseman has reached the century mark in the last 30 years: Erik Karlsson two years ago for San Jose. Makar finished with 90 points in 77 games last year, and I expect an even bigger 2024-25. He finished top 10 in the league (and led all defensemen) with 39 points on the power play a season ago, and Colorado's power play could be even more potent this season. Makar should play upward of 26 minutes per game, most of which will be shared with the Avs' high-powered top line with Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen. This could be Makar's best season yet. — Jesse Granger

## Columbus Blue Jackets

Yegor Chinakhov will bloom as a goal scorer: Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson have performed this preseason as if they're ready to be breakout players in 2024-25, but there's another youngster who tends to exist below the spotlight. Chinakhov, who had 16 goals in 53 games last season, is going to get a much bigger role than the 15:10 per game he played. With Boone Jenner out long-term with an upper-body injury, Chinakhov has moved up to the top line with center Sean Monahan and right winger Kirill Marchenko. Chinakhov, if he remains healthy, could easily score 25 goals or more. — Aaron Portzline

## Dallas Stars

The Stars will win the Stanley Cup: Honestly, I'm not even sure this qualifies as "bold." The Stars have become a model NHL franchise, with general manager Jim Nill building a team that's deep, talented, and features a perfect blending of youth and veteran savvy. Losing Chris Tanev to Toronto hurt, but the Stars will be buyers again at the trade deadline, and if there are any holes to plug, they'll be plugged. Much of this prediction hinges on Jake Oettinger and Jason Robertson returning to form after surprisingly ordinary 2023-24 campaigns (by their lofty standards). The guess here is they both do, and the Cup stays in the Sun Belt for the third straight year, and the fifth time in the last six years. — Mark Lazerus

## Detroit Red Wings

Dylan Larkin will score 40 goals: The Red Wings haven't had a 40-goal scorer since Marian Hossa in 2008-09. But Larkin came closer than you might realize to changing that last season: He finished with 33 goals in 68 games, which over an 82-game season totals out to a 39.7-goal pace. He's found a whole new level as a scorer over the past three seasons, and Detroit has finally surrounded him with the kind of talent needed to threaten 40. The question now is just health, as he hasn't played a full 82 games since 2017-18. He hit 80 just two seasons ago, though, and if he can do that again, I think it'll be enough to make this prediction come true. — Max Bultman

## Edmonton Oilers

Stuart Skinner will finish top five in Vezina voting: Skinner was solid in the playoffs save for the Vancouver series and enters the season as an undisputed No. 1 goalie for the first time in his career. He should be primed for a breakout campaign. With a Stanley Cup-contending team in front of him, there's no reason to think that shouldn't happen. But this won't be a case of Skinner simply riding his teammates' coattails. The defensive group has some major question marks. The PK, so outstanding in the postseason, has undergone significant turnover. Skinner will deserve his roses for an excellent season. A likely spot on Team Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off tourney will only increase the spotlight on him and give NHL GMs — the voters on this award — more reason to cast ballots in his favor. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

## Florida Panthers

Adam Boqvist will break out: Florida didn't make many offseason changes as it already has a championship core in place. Don't mess with what works. We're still going to predict the Panthers work their magic on 24-year-old Boqvist, their latest defensive reclamation project. He showed some power-play chops and transition ability in his time with the Blackhawks and Blue Jackets, and the Panthers have certainly shown an organizational knack for putting their defensemen in position to succeed. — Sean Gentile

## Los Angeles Kings

Quinton Byfield will become the Kings' best player: Let's see, the Kings could be a team in danger of missing the playoffs, but they've got enough to at least nab a wild-card spot in the West so I'm not going to provide any receipts for that. But Byfield is giving off the vibe that he wants to be a star after a confidence-building 20-goal, 55-point breakout 2023-24 season. He had a hat trick in the preseason and was clicking with Kevin Fiala, who fed off the big center's speed. Byfield was winning faceoffs in a decisive manner. He looks more confident with his shot and has the size and improving hands to do damage at the net. The Kings need an heir apparent to Anze Kopitar as their 1C. Byfield will take those big steps toward becoming The Guy. "He's much more mature than he was a few years ago, physically," Kings GM Rob Blake said. "We saw his ability to play some there last year, and we expect him to continue to grow there." — Eric Stephens

## Minnesota Wild

Matt Boldy will score 40 goals and 40 assists: General manager Bill Guerin has predicted 50 goals and 50 assists at some point in Boldy's future. We'll be a hair more conservative for this season, while still being bold enough to establish a new career high (previously 69 points). When John Hynes talks about Boldy, he salivates, and for good reason. Boldy scored 28 goals and 61 points in 63 games (a 36-goal, 79-point 82-game pace) under Hynes last season. Then, Hynes coached Boldy at the World Championship, and the United States right wing led the tournament in scoring with 14 points in eight games. Boldy didn't play any exhibition games due to a lower-body injury, but the 23-year-old opened 2024-25 with 3 points in his first game. — Michael Russo

## Montreal Canadiens

Juraj Slafkovský will hit 70 points: With the way Slafkovský finished last season and entering this season firmly established on the Canadiens' top line and top power-play unit, the conditions are ripe for Slafkovský to make a 20-point jump in his production from last season. The vastly improved playmaking we saw from him over the second half of last season will be the driving force behind the more than 40 percent jump in production. — Arpon Basu

## Nashville Predators

Juuse Saros will win the Vezina Trophy: Saros begins the season with a lower-body injury, but it won't be long before the Preds are relying on him, heavily, after he signed an eight-year deal with a \$7.74 million AAV in the offseason. Players don't always reach their highest level right after signing big deals, but Saros now has clarity — the organization chose him over top prospect Yaroslav Askarov — and that figures to help him. So should getting support from skaters in their second season in Andrew Brunette's system. It's time for Saros to win one. — Joe Rexrode

## New Jersey Devils

The Devils will finish with the East's best record: I'm high on the Devils after their offseason additions. Jacob Markström is a monster upgrade in net, and Brett Pesce and Brenden Dillon are big boosts to a defensive corps that missed Ryan Graves and Damon Severson last year. That, paired with growth in young players, should make New Jersey formidable, at least in the regular season. — Peter Baugh

## New York Islanders

Noah Dobson will score 70 points again — and get a big extension: Dobson moved into a different tier of NHL defenseman last season, not only producing at an elite level but also playing major minutes while Adam Pelech, Ryan Pullock and Scott Mayfield were out with injuries. A healthy defense will allow Dobson to avoid being overworked while still letting him impress. So he'll join Denis Potvin as the only Isles defenseman with multiple 70-point seasons and he'll secure the bag, too: an eight-year extension around Ilya Sorokin's \$8.25 million per year. — Arthur Staple

## New York Rangers

Igor Shesterkin will win the Vezina Trophy: We've seen Shesterkin handle pressure well. He has a career .928 save percentage in the playoffs and was by far the Rangers' best player last postseason. Well, with his contract set to expire next summer, he's going to be facing pressure this season. Shesterkin already has the cachet to expect to be the highest-paid goalie in the league. A monster season reminiscent of his 2021-22 one will further increase that belief, and the Rangers will have to decide how much they're willing to pay to keep him. — Peter Baugh

## Ottawa Senators

Travis Green will win the Jack Adams Award: If the Senators make the playoffs this season, the coach will get a lot of credit for his team's upward swing. The young nucleus of talent is already in place and they've added a goaltender. The Senators just need a coach who can bring them to that next level. Green has coached a team to the playoffs before, albeit once. If he ends Ottawa's playoff drought, he should be considered a front-runner for coach of the year. — Julian McKenzie

## Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers will have a top-15 power play: What, that doesn't sound bold enough? Well, consider the Flyers have had the league's worst power play for each of the last three seasons. Last season, at just 12.2 percent, they were nearly 3 full percentage points behind the 31st-ranked Blue Jackets. But with Matvei Michkov now here and coming off of a stellar preseason, and what looks to be a healthy Jamie Drysdale moving well and quarterbacking the top unit, the potential is there for the Flyers to drastically improve with a man advantage. — Kevin Kurz

## Pittsburgh Penguins

Marcus Pettersson will become a trade-deadline commodity: In his prime and a steady top-four defender, Pettersson is an impending UFA. He's the type of defenseman GMs tend to keep from testing

the market. But Kyle Dubas seems to know his Penguins are closer to the lottery than the Cup, and his decision not to sign Pettersson before the season suggests Pettersson will become this season's Jake Guentzel in Pittsburgh. — Rob Rossi

#### San Jose Sharks

William Eklund will lead the team in scoring: Sure, there was the temptation to call Macklin Celebrini the Calder Trophy winner in this space. But is that really a bold pick given that he goes into this season as a leading Calder contender in a strong rookie class? The 18-year-old will no doubt have some impressive moments, and we shouldn't discount the impact his potential running mate Will Smith could have as a fellow rookie. Eklund, who turns 22 on Saturday, is a slightly unconventional pick. The left wing quietly emerged in the second half of last season with 27 points in his final 35 games. He's going to start out on the top line with Celebrini and Tyler Toffoli while figuring in their power play. It could be a balanced group atop San Jose's point list, but to follow our Sean McIndoe's lead of oddly specific predictions, we'll say Eklund will have 26 goals and 40 assists for 66 points. — Eric Stephens

#### Seattle Kraken

Matty Beniers will score 30 goals: Beniers went through a difficult sophomore slump in his second NHL campaign, but he remains a gifted, assertive young center with a swashbuckling style and game-breaking bona fides, which he proved in his rookie year. Beniers is going to return to form and then some in his third campaign, scoring 30 goals and re-establishing himself as one of the NHL's most promising young pivots. — Thomas Drance

#### St. Louis Blues

Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway's success will lead to more offer sheets: Broberg has been physical and Holloway fast so far. It's early, so why is that important? Because Broberg and Holloway are exactly what the club needed, and the way general manager Doug Armstrong acquired them from the Oilers was via offer-sheet contracts. In the rare instance when offer sheets are executed, many wonder whether they will lead to more, and in reality, the answer has been no. But with the new ceilings and expected success for Broberg and Holloway in St. Louis, there could be an uptick. — Jeremy Rutherford

#### Tampa Bay Lightning

Andrei Vasilevskiy will be a Vezina Trophy finalist: Vasilevskiy will show that his lackluster 2023-24 season was due to back surgery. With a healthy offseason to train and time to get back on track, he will pick up where he left off in 2022-23 with his usual game-breaking play. Vasilevskiy showed he can be the difference despite defensive struggles in front of him in 2022-23. With the return of Ryan McDonagh and the addition of Jake Guentzel, he should have more two-way support, which will help him get back to his former heights. — Shayna Goldman

#### Toronto Maple Leafs

Mitch Marner will score 40 goals: This is a kind of a long shot given Marner's primary skill and instinct is passing and he happens to play with the top goal scorer in the NHL today, Auston Matthews. Yet, Marner scores more than he gets credit for. In the last three seasons, he scored only one goal fewer (91) than John Tavares and did so in 18 fewer games. Marner scored at a 30-goal pace last season, hit 30 on the nose the year before that, and buried 35 goals in only 72 games during the 2021-22 season, a 40-goal pace. Getting to 40 would require Marner to look for his own shot more than he often does and probably garner some shooting luck along the way, more than his current career best of 16.5 percent. At some point, maybe even this season, I expect him to get there or come close at the very least. — Jonas Siegel



## Utah Hockey Club

They will finish as one of the NHL's highest-scoring teams: It's a given Utah is going to be an exciting hockey club to watch, what with the energy in the new market, weird building and all its young stars. But its collection of talent is such that it could quickly rise to the ranks of the most dangerous offensive teams, too. Clayton Keller could score 40, as could Dylan Guenther. It's not out of the question as many as eight Hockey Clubbers hit the 20 mark, which should push them into the top 10 leaguewide. — James Mirtle

## Vancouver Canucks

Elias Pettersson will bounce back and lead the team in scoring: Pettersson struggled enormously down the stretch and into the playoffs last season, and Canucks fans are beginning to lose patience with their superstar center. In the club's first game of the campaign, after Pettersson lost the handle on a deke by the offensive blue line, the Rogers Arena crowd reacted with something of a Bronx cheer. Granted the club had frittered away two separate 3-goal leads, so frustration was running high, but it still encapsulates the pressure Pettersson is under. Despite all of that noise, Pettersson remains a star performer. A pivot with 40-goal, 100-point upside. With Vancouver emphasizing attacking off the rush this season, and talented wingers like Daniel Sprong and Jake DeBrusk on his line, we predict Pettersson will bounce back and outscore all other Canucks skaters during the 2024-25 regular season. — Thomas Drance

## Vegas Golden Knights

Pavel Dorofeyev will finish second on the team in goals: Dorofeyev showed he could score as a rookie with 13 goals in 47 games last year for the Golden Knights. He has a deceptive release on his wrist shots and a knack for finding pucks in front of the net. Now, projected to play alongside pass-first forwards such as Mark Stone, William Karlsson and/or Tomas Hertl, Dorofeyev is in a great position to produce at an even higher rate in 2024-25. — Jesse Granger

## Washington Capitals

The Pierre-Luc Dubois deal will pay off: It's hard to imagine predicting anything bolder than Dubois finally finding a long-term home, so we'll go with that. He'll give the Caps what he was supposed to give the Kings — productive two-way play from a high-end second-line center. Does that mean they'll get their \$8.5 million worth? Let's not get greedy. Still, 70 points would go a long way toward rehabbing his reputation and putting the Caps back in the playoff conversation. — Sean Gentille

## Winnipeg Jets

Nikolaj Ehlers will play out the season and then walk as a UFA: As part of a longer conversation about his future, Ehlers said: "We talk. Chevy, my agent. There's communication." Ehlers understands we all want answers about his future but conveyed that, at his core, he himself is unsure what comes next — a contract extension, a trade, or a summer 2025 departure to free agency. The idea of ongoing conversations could create a sense of optimism: Winnipeg has certainly shown itself to be capable of signing big-ticket players late in the game. It would also be sensible for Winnipeg to shop Ehlers at the deadline if it can't sign him, instead of losing him for nothing next summer. My wild October stab at it says the Jets keep Ehlers for the playoffs, address their defense a different way if need be, and then Ehlers picks a team that gives him more than the sixth-most minutes per game among forwards. — Murat Ates

## [Sportsnet.ca](https://www.sportsnet.ca) / THE 25 PEOPLE WHO WILL DEFINE THE NHL SEASON

By Luke Fox- October 12, 2024

At the core of every good (and bad and ugly) sporting story, you'll find people. Here are the 25 newsmakers and game-breakers set to define the NHL in 2024-25.

Record-snappers and legacy chasers. Contract hunters and barrier-breakers. Crafty negotiators and billionaire influencers.

As the curtain rises on the 2024-25 NHL season, fans will be glued to the drama on and off the ice. They'll get hyped over the new faces in the new places and will (finally!) be treated to some international best-on-best hockey.

Like pens scratching paper, skates scratching ice will write this season's stories.

And at the core of every good (and bad and ugly) sporting story, you'll find people. Supreme on-ice talents and front-office giants. Combustible coaches and groundbreaking overachievers. The National Hockey League will lean on all the above to keep our attention throughout the winter and deep into spring.

Here, in alphabetical order, are the 25 newsmakers and game-breakers set to define NHL 2024-25.

Sneaky. Creative. And totally within the rules. Armstrong's predatory — and successful — double offer sheets to Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg allowed the savvy executive to swipe two young talents from the conference champs. It also ratcheted up the temperature for the Blues-Oilers in-season series and, hopefully, expedited the 2019 Cup winner's roster reset. "Quite honestly, I'd do it to my mother if she was managing the Oilers," Armstrong proclaimed. The Code has been broken, and with the cap on the rise, Armstrong might have started a trend. Moreover, Armstrong has been named Canada's GM for the 2026 Olympics, and he'll be keeping one eye on scouting for the nation. (No doubt, he'll snatch a couple more Oilers for that team, too.)

The commissioner's plate runneth over. Regional TV contracts are in flux, and the national Canadian package will be up for grabs soon. Hungry would-be expansion team owners are knocking down his door (U.S. applicants only?). The Olympics still need an official signoff. And a new CBA, to be bargained with the engaged union chief Marty Walsh, lies just around the corner. Bettman will continue to highlight hockey's progress. The Coyotes' move, Amazon Prime's increased interest, and the 4 Nations Face-Off are all wins. Still, financially, the NBA has left the NHL in its dust, and hockey faces competition for viewership from soccer, golf, tennis, UFC, and F1.

"To the young girls who need to hear it... you can and you will." That's the caption Campbell posted on Instagram — appropriately punctuated with an ice-blue heart emoji — after getting the call up from the minors. The Saskatchewan native will smash barriers this fall as she joins Dan Bylsma on the Seattle Kraken staff, the first woman to coach full-time on an NHL bench. An incredible accomplishment, to be sure. But it comes parceled with the immediate challenge of rallying the Kraken back into the postseason.

Fans of the other 31 clubs are wondering why their MVP can't be a top-10 hockey player at age 37, and why he won't skate for a ridiculously team-friendly \$8.7 million? Crosby's commitment reinforces the Pittsburgh captain's desire for team success — to snuff the Penguins' playoff drought at two years — but it also piles even more pressure onto Kyle Dubas's front office. The Metropolitan is hardly a division of world-beaters and Crosby has helped free up some spending money to turn this aging outfit into a

playoff team again. Regardless, we'll finally be treated to Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon on the same squad at the 4 Nations tourney. Meaningful hockey awaits the selfless Kid.

Mystery shrouds the Vezina Trophy finalist's health for this critical campaign, as questions over the particulars of his injury (injuries?) and the remedies taken have lingered since he bowed out of the playoffs banged up. (That backup Arturs Silvos was also less than 100 per cent this summer increases concern.) Demko, 28, is one of the best at his position when ready to go. Yet he has never stayed healthy for a full 82. And he now reveals that his injury is so unique, no other hockey player has dealt with it. Demko's (avail)ability is imperative if Rick Tocchet's encouraged bunch are to prove that 2023-24's 50-win eruption was no fluke — and could well earn him a nod for Team USA.

Demko's health is a question mark as opening night looms, and his (avail)ability is imperative for the Canucks.

The life and legacy of Gaudreau — the little player that could — has impacted the cities of Calgary and Columbus, while tributes for Johnny Hockey and brother Matthew keep flowing like the brothers' joy for the sport. "Johnny didn't crave the spotlight, but with that big smile and those fast hands, he couldn't outrun his fate. He was a hero," Lanny McDonald said. "He carried this big hockey town on his small frame." This season, the wonderful memory and senseless death of the Gaudreaus will be carried by all those around the league touched by their passion and rocked by their passing.

The projected first-overall pick of the 2025 draft broke some guy named Nikita Kucherov's points record (22) at this summer's IIHF U-18 World Championship, ramping up his hype as the NHL Draft Lottery's grand prize. Hagens, 17, is off to Boston College, where the centreman will be one of the youngest players in the NCAA and aspire to raise his game above that of top-rated Canadian prospect Porter Martone. As per tradition, rebuilding clubs — Columbus, Anaheim, San Jose, Chicago, Calgary, who else? — will sell at the deadline and embrace the race for hopefuls like this playmaking stud from Long Island. Saggin' for Hagens?

Since making the transition from agent of the Oilers' superstar to the club's CEO, all Jackson has done is oversee an impactful mid-season coaching change and a trip to Game 7 of the Cup Final; hire, amid criticism, Stan Bowman to replace Ken Holland as general manager; execute a much-lauded free agency without a GM in place; get hit with the rare double offer sheet; and sign off on the most expensive contract extension in the cap era. Now, Jackson's organization — Canada's best bet to end a 32-year curse — must clear that one final hurdle on the ice while accommodating hefty raises for arguably the most valuable pending RFA (Evan Bouchard) and for Connor McDavid, eligible to ink the NHL's richest contract extension come July 1.

Tom Fitzgerald was all over Keefe once the man with the sparkling 349-212-79 record and perfect post-season attendance was handed his walking papers in Toronto. Following a disappointing 2023-24 in New Jersey — hindered by injuries, inexperienced defence, and an absence of saves — many are circling the Devils as the team most poised for a resurgence in 2024-25, thanks to a healed Dougie Hamilton and Jack Hughes, plus the legit goalie tandem of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen. Bounce-back teams generate Jack Adams candidates. If Keefe, who moves a half-step out of the spotlight, can guide the Devils to the dance, he'll reap rave reviews.

If Laine can rediscover his love for the game and rebound from a crushing preseason knee sprain, he could provide the Habs with some much-needed scoring and power-play swagger.

Now seven seasons removed from his stellar 44-goal, 70-point showing as a sophomore in Winnipeg, 2016's second-overall draft pick finds himself rehabbing another injury before debuting with his third team. If the affable sniper can rediscover his love for the game and rebound from a crushing preseason

knee sprain, he could provide the Montreal Canadiens with some much-needed scoring and power-play swagger. The team and the player need each other. “I want him to be excited to play hockey. I want him to have that passion,” coach Martin St. Louis says. “I want him to be excited to come to the rink. No matter what I do, if he doesn’t have that passion, nothing else will stick.” Mercifully, Laine doesn’t need surgery, but will the Habs still be playing relevant games by the time their big off-season swing returns?

We can see the emotional Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy acceptance speech already. Should the Colorado Avalanche captain return to game action for the first time since accepting the 2022 Stanley Cup — which remains a big if — Landeskog will easily be this winter’s greatest comeback story. “He’s trying to make a return here sometime near the start of the season, and if that goes well, it would be a really big boost for us,” said coach Jared Bednar, whose club must start without suspended Valeri Nichushkin. “So, that’s something we’re all a little anxious about, but really excited about as well. He hasn’t played for us in two years.” Landeskog, 31, has kept the faith after a series of surgeries and setbacks. “Still a lot to be done, but I’m excited,” he told the Denver Post. “I feel like a hockey player again.”

For those having just now awakened from a coma: Marner is entering a contract year, and it’s a topic of discussion in Toronto. Despite no public profession from management that re-signing Marner is a high priority, the all-star right wing is back for what should be another all-star regular season. Agent Darren Ferris generally prefers his stud pending UFAs to play out 82 games and maximize their bargaining power, and it will be stunning if the two-way talent accepted a contract extension with a lower AAV than teammate William Nylander’s \$11.5 million. So, what is Brad Treliving’s move here? The Maple Leafs GM could try to finagle a trade even though Marner holds full protection (unlikely), keep betting big bucks on elite talent (possibly), or simply wait and see if Marner & Co. can deliver come playoff time, putting the decision off until June.

All the world’s greatest hockey player did in 2023-24 was throw down 100 assists, turn the All-Star Skills Competition into a personal showcase, capture the Conn Smythe, push his Oilers within a couple goals of the most dramatic comeback in Stanley Cup Final history, and become a breakout reality-TV star. What could McDavid possibly cook up for an encore? Well, the man himself cares not for individual accomplishments at this stage — though Leon Draisaitl is on record saying McDavid could return to 60-goal form. McDavid’s eyes are fixed on the big prize, not the record-setting contract extension that presumably will follow next summer. Edmonton is a Cup favourite, again. Draisaitl is staying put. Support players are signing up and taking less. And McDavid is the top reason why.

GM Danny Briere’s big swing at the 2023 draft takes his talents to North America after tearing up the KHL for nearly a point per game as a teenager. The Calder Trophy frontrunner represents hope for the rebuilding Philadelphia Flyers and quite the philosophical foil for John Tortorella hockey. You all caught the clip of the rookie attempting a Michigan goal right in front of his old-school coach, right? “There’s going to be some fireworks,” Briere says of the player-coach relationship. “But he’s going to teach him to be a pro. He’s going to teach him to be the best player he can be.”

There was a time when the Washington Capitals were focused on breaking through and winning a Stanley Cup. These days, the club’s narrative revolves around the singular aim of one indestructible individual’s pursuit of the all-time goal-scoring record. Wayne Gretzky’s 894 was once believed to be untouchable, but a 39-year-old Ovechkin enters the franchise’s 50th season just 42 red lamps away from the unthinkable. Sure, Washington is hoping a refreshed Pierre-Luc Dubois and Jakob Chychrun can return them to the post-season, but in D.C., it’s all about The Gr8 Chase™. With Ovi signed through 2025-26, his record-breaking goal now feels like a when, not an if. Says John Carlson: “One thing I’ve learned is not to doubt him.”

When his (and Stan Bowman's) employment ban was lifted by the NHL over the summer, Coach Q instantly became the most intriguing, accomplished, and controversial free agent on the open market. Clearly, the three-time Cup-winner wants back in the game after being banished in wake of the Kyle Beach investigation. ("By not asking more questions, I take ownership on that. Had I known more, I would've handled it completely different," Quenneville says.) Considering the recent success of in-season replacement coaches such as Kris Knoblauch, expect Q's name to pop up as soon as a team with lofty expectations hits the skids.

Hi-re! Lin-dy! With Kevyn Adams' back slammed against a wall and his face staring at the threat of a 14th consecutive playoff miss (barf), the Sabres GM is bringing back Ruff to coach after an 11-year hiatus from the team. Can another fresh (if familiar) voice be the solution to Buffalo's never-ending rebuild? Or will the Pegulas turn their focus to Adams if the promising core he has constructed, and compensated, cannot skate its way to meaningful hockey in March?

Sorely underpaid at \$5.66 million, the New York Rangers' No. 1 goalie strolls into his walk year as both the most valuable member of the defending Presidents' Trophy champs and the goalie union. Will Shesterkin push hard to become the highest-paid netminder since GMs got squeamish after the massive contracts signed by Carey Price and Sergei Bobrovsky? Or will the locked-in Russian do Chris Drury a solid and leave some dough on the table (see: Hellebuyck, Connor) to accommodate raises for pending RFAs Alexis Lafreniere and K'Andre Miller, and help extend New York's window of contention?

The savvy 46-year-old entrepreneur rushes into the NHL with deep pockets and grand ideas. As proud owner of the Utah Hockey Club, Smith has injected money and, more importantly, hope into a franchise that felt deserted in Arizona. Armed with picks, prospects, plenty of cap space, a sold-out NBA arena, plus a revamped top four (Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino), Salt Lake City is poised to soar as it rises from the ashes of Phoenix. "(Smith) just sat us down and said, 'You know, I want to know what you guys need to feel comfortable,'" Clayton Keller says. "Everything has come true. He's really made us feel at home."

General manager of both the Boston Bruins and Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off squad, Sweeney's roster decisions will arguably be the winter's most scrutinized. Rankled by back-to-back playoff defeats to Florida, the Atlantic Division's undisputed king, Sweeney splashed the pot in free agency — adding Elias Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov — before engaging in a stubborn, testy, and unusually public RFA contract negotiation with stud goalie Jeremy Swayman. Swayman, an American, could well be the one standing between Sweeney's other roster (mercifully uncapped) and a 4 Nations championship come February... in Boston. (P.S. Did we mention cap-friendly captain Brad Marchand is stepping into a contract year?)

Nashville's second-ever GM started rebuilding on the fly and now he's ready for the good ship Predators to soar. Showing the stomach for the bold move, Trotz was the first star of free agency, landing not one but two 40-goal forwards (chip-on-their-shoulder Cup-winners Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault) as well as coveted top-four defenceman Brady Skjei. He recommitted to Juuse Saros and traded the hottest goalie prospect around. Sure, the tax breaks are in Trotz's favour, but he's swiftly cultivated a contender in Music City. And now the team that has long relied on defence might have the scoring punch to make noise in the crowded Central.

Another big swing in the Senators' crease, Ullmark joins an Ottawa club looking to take an overdue step toward playoff-race relevancy.

After six straight post-seasons in which they've won at least one round but failed to reach the Stanley Cup Final, the Carolina Hurricanes are earning a rep as a good team that's never good enough. Long-serving and influential assistant Tulsy steps up for departed GM Don Waddell (now with Columbus) and must not only keep the boat afloat but push it to a new horizon. Not an easy task considering the talent

lost in free agency and the demands of managing up (owner Tom Dundon wants his say) and down. A Harvard grad with a PhD in chemistry from Berkeley, young Tulskey is hardly a member of The Old Boys Club. His success (or lack thereof) could well influence more outside-the-box hires.

Another off-season, another big swing in the Senators' crease. Remember Matt Murray? Cam Talbot? Joonas Korpi? If you do, you'll also recall that none of those veteran starters could muster so much as a .900 save percentage behind Ottawa's inexperienced skaters. Enter good-vibes Ullmark, only one season removed from winning the Vezina, William Jennings and Presidents' Trophies (and scoring a sick goalie goal). With arena relocation desires, a new head coach, and an ambitious owner, it's no secret that a step toward playoff-race relevancy is overdue in Canada's capital. The lads could use a few saves. "We all play to win. We don't play for fun," Ullmark says.

The union chief made strides in Year 1, working with the league to establish an international calendar, diving into Babcockgate, and seeing a happy conclusion to the disgruntled Arizona chapter of the PA's membership. He also helped sell the players on Amazon's all-access docuseries, Faceoff. Walsh already has had some contentious individual cases cross his desk in the pre-season — Robin Lehner in Vegas and Ryan Johansen in Philadelphia, and the cap floor in Columbus. He has managed them quietly. Work on those must be balanced with big-picture items such as how to best escalate the cap and keep peace during preliminary CBA talks with Bettman.

How long would patience last in Detroit if the Red Wings were not being run by an on-ice icon and the architect of a championship in Tampa Bay? Yzerman enters his sixth year at the helm in Hockeytown as both the longest-tenured active GM yet to make the playoffs and overseer of the NHL's second-longest active post-season drought — the longest in franchise history at eight seasons and counting. The Red Wings have a shiny new barn but attendance issues. They locked in two young stars in the nick of time (Lucas Raymond, Moritz Seider), and they're banking on some fading ones (Patrick Kane, Vladimir Tarasenko). The man in charge can't lace 'em up to save the day. Stevie Y needs a W.

## Globe And Mail / Amazon Prime's NHL Coast to Coast show is hockey for the fidgety TikTok generation

By Simon Hupt- October 12, 2024

It took all of about 15 minutes of watching NHL Coast to Coast on Thursday night before I felt myself starting to twitch involuntarily.

The show, a weekly Amazon Prime studio broadcast of live action and almost-live highlights, is the first genuinely new approach to hockey coverage in Canada in years. Modelled on the NFL's RedZone Sunday marathon that popularized what's known as whiparound coverage, Coast to Coast hoovers up the local feeds of all games taking place over the course of a night – this week, eight matches kicked off between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. (ET) – and then serves them up for viewers when the action intensifies.

For NFL fans watching RedZone, that can sometimes mean filling the screen with up to eight games at a time – the infamous octobox. But because football broadcasts are filled with so much downtime – shots of the crowd, ads, barking coaches, players lolling on the sidelines – it's usually not a problem to focus on the action when it breaks out in one of the boxes.

Hockey is an entirely different beast. So when, this week, the Coast to Coast producers simultaneously put up the Kings-Sabres, Canadiens-Bruins and Leafs-Devils games – and then later filled the screen with four games featuring rollicking end-to-end action – I started to feel like I'd got on a roller coaster without popping a Graval. Even host Andi Petrillo hinted at the effect. "I feel like my dog now," she said, imitating what happens when her doodle suddenly eyes some prey in the backyard. "'Squirrel! Squirrel!' I know exactly how they feel. 'New Jersey!' 'Squirrel!'"

But Petrillo, 44, and I (er, older than 44) aren't the target audience, anyway. The NHL is hungry to woo Gen-Z and Gen-A, who have been raised on video games and rarely watch a single regular-season game from start to finish – though, to be frank, do any of us, any more?

Coast to Coast, a co-production of NHL Productions and Amazon Prime as part of the streamer's entry this year into hockey in Canada, is shot in a New Jersey studio decked out in what's supposed to be a cottage motif: The wall behind Petrillo is filled with a graphic of an oversized picture window looking out onto a lake, with mountains in the distance. Every so often, an animation of stars would dapple across the evening sky in the distance. If you looked closely, you might have noticed they formed the shape of the swooshy Amazon arrow that's slapped on every Prime home-delivery package.

For the program's inaugural edition, Petrillo was joined in studio by P.K. Subban and Jason Demers, two jovial fellows who have recast themselves after retirement from their pro careers as entertaining – and sometimes unbridled – hockey broadcasters for ESPN and the NHL Network, respectively. They were reliably quippy, even if they also had a nervous energy – it was, after all, opening night – which meant they frequently talked over each other.

Still, the three together had a looseness that's unusual for Canadian hockey broadcasts, even among the crew at TSN, who tend to have more chirpy camaraderie than the folks at Sportsnet. It was infectious. When Demers showed off custom-made kicks decorated with the logos of the five teams he'd played for, and noted he wasn't wearing any socks, Subban quipped, "His ankles are lotioned, too, so that's good."

On opening night, the show was clearly a work in progress: With multiple games on screen, sometimes the audio from one game in which nothing much was happening would be heard, while audio from

another game showing a goal was muted. Too often, producers would cut away from exciting moments – such as when the Florida Panthers pulled their goalie toward the end of their game against the Senators – to show an inconsequential goal that had happened minutes before in a different game that hadn't been featured much all night long.

Maybe there was just too much going on for producers to digest: more than 55 goals were scored during the time that Petrillo and company were on. Still, the NHL has to be pleased. On first blush, the show plays like a four-hour weekly ad for the league.

About two hours in, Coast to Coast came back from a commercial break to find NHL commissioner Gary Bettman relaxing in the studio. Bettman's default public persona is jittery and defensive, but as you watched, you might have found yourself wondering if perhaps that's just because we only see him when boos are raining down from resentful fans, or when he's facing pesky reporters. Nestled comfortably between Petrillo and Subban, he was almost radiant.

"It looks like you guys are having fun," he said. Petrillo gushed about the slick Prime set, and Demers, who as a defenceman was always good for an assist, set up Bettman with a prompt about how awesome the new owners of the Utah Hockey Club are. The conversation got around to the fact that, the previous night, Bettman had been hanging with the singer Shaboozey after a pregame concert at the Utah home opener.

"I was sending video clips to members of my family," Bettman explained, "and, at least to my teenaged grandchildren, all of a sudden I got cool." Petrillo gushed about "all these celebrities that are jumping on board."

This must all feel like a dream to Bettman. After decades of selling his hockey games to broadcasters who insisted on at least occasionally being able to have their reporters ask him tough questions, along comes a streamer with bottomless pockets, more data about his fan base than George Orwell could have ever dreamed possible, and seemingly no interest in ruining the good vibes with anything approaching journalism.

"You're welcome in this studio any time," Petrillo said. "It feels cozy," Bettman replied.