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**Columbus Blue Jackets**

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## Columbus Dispatch / Replay: Columbus Blue Jackets score six goals again, rout Edmonton Oilers

By Brian Hedger – October 29, 2024

Once again, they overwhelmed a high-powered opponent with three goals in the first period, scored six goals in total and won by blowout, topping the Oilers, 6-1, in front of 15,237 who watched in the building. Elvis Merzlikins picked up the goaltending win, allowing his lone goal with 26.8 seconds left in the third period.

"Those nights of (allowing) six goals, I've had quite a bit of them," Merzlikins said. "It's not a good feeling. It's good that we have a big change this year. I think we are really solid in the back (end), and even in the front. We know what we're doing right now. Last year, we definitely didn't look like we knew what we were doing when we got the puck. Here, everyone knows their own role, everyone is working hard and there (are) no jokes anymore. We're seriously playing hockey here right now."

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) makes a save in front of Edmonton Oilers right wing Vasily Podkolzin (92) during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

Sean Monahan scored two goals to lead the way offensively, his fourth and fifth of the season, Cole Sillinger and Adam Fantilli finished with three points each on a goal and two assists, and rookie Mikael Pyyhtia scored the first goal of his NHL career in the win.

Mathieu Olivier also scored his fourth goal of the season and Kirill Marchenko racked up two assists to increase his team scoring lead to 11 points (four goals, seven assists). The Oilers lost captain Connor McDavid just 37 seconds into his first shift with an unspecified leg/foot injury. This was Edmonton's lone visit this season to Columbus, where they haven't won since Oct. 30, 2019.

Here's a review of game updates, in-game analysis and more.

Columbus Blue Jackets players salute the fans following the NHL hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 6-1.

**FINAL:** Columbus Blue Jackets 6, Edmonton Oilers 1

The Jackets bounce back from a loss with yet another early statement victory over the Oilers, scoring six more goals in the process and getting the goose egg in net from Merzlikins.

**GOAL, 3rd period, 19:33:** Columbus Blue Jackets, Edmonton Oilers 1

Mattias Ekholm spoiled Merzlikins' shutout bit with less than 30 seconds left in the third, causing the frustrated goalie to whack the goal post with his paddle. It was one of few negative things for the Blue Jackets during an otherwise memorable evening.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan (23) celebrates scoring a goal with teammates during the third period of the NHL hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 6-1.

**GOAL, 3rd period, 16:39:** Columbus Blue Jackets 6, Edmonton Oilers 0

Make it six goals again for the Blue Jackets. Monahan's second of the night, assisted by Yegor Chinakhov and Marchenko, pushes them to the six-goal plateau for the fourth time in their first eight games. That's a crazy stat, but this is a new team in Columbus.

**GOAL, 3rd period, 15:15:** Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Edmonton Oilers 0

Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Mikael Pyyhtia (82) celebrates scoring his first NHL goal during the third period of the hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 6-1.

There it is ... first goal of Mikael Pyyhtia's NHL career. He's waited a while, and while he's waited the Finnish rookie has played really good hockey. This time, he gets the reward with a beautiful pass from Fantili from deep on the left wing across the low slot.

Pyyhtia tapped it home for a five-goal margin.

**3rd period, 12:12:** Columbus Blue Jackets cruising with 4-0 lead over Edmonton Oilers

Neither team appears all that interested in scoring goals this period, as each team has put five shots on net with just under eight minutes left. This favors the Blue Jackets, who are running down the clock with a four-goal lead.

**3rd period:** Columbus Blue Jackets 4, Edmonton Oilers 0

Tonight's announced attendance is 15,237 here at Nationwide Arena tonight.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson (3) moves the puck away from Edmonton Oilers right wing Corey Perry (90) and Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

**3rd period underway:** Columbus Blue Jackets 4, Edmonton Oilers 0

The puck is on the ice for the third, as the Blue Jackets try to polish off what would be another impressive early victory in their eighth game this season.

**2nd intermission:** Columbus Blue Jackets 4, Edmonton Oilers 0

The Oilers are outshooting the Jackets 23-14 and have a 40-32 edge in attempted shots through the first two periods. Those are about the only positives for the visitors from Alberta tonight. Columbus has a commanding four-goal lead with a period left.

Edmonton is clearly missing McDavid, but the Oilers still have a lot of firepower left in the game.

**GOAL, 7:05 2nd period:** Columbus Blue Jackets 4, Edmonton Oilers 0

A week ago, Mathieu Olivier scored two goals in the Jackets' blowout of the Maple Leafs. He just scored for the first time in this one, pushing the Blue Jackets' lead to a 4-0 with a hard work tally at the right post for his fourth goal of the season. Olivier scored five goals in each of the past two seasons for Columbus, but is well on his way to exceeding that number in just the eighth game of this season.

James van Riemsdyk with the lone assist.

**1st intermission:** Columbus Blue Jackets 3, Edmonton Oilers 0

Just like they did a week ago in a 6-2 blowout win over the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Blue Jackets have raced out to a three-goal lead after 20 minutes at Nationwide Arena, where the Oilers haven't won since October 2019.

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Yegor Chinakhov (59) races Edmonton Oilers defenseman Ty Emberson (49) to the loose puck during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

Sean Monahan, Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillingers scored the goals, Merzlikins made 11 saves without allowing a goal and three Blue Jackets already have multiple points: Zach Werenski (two assists), Adam Fantilli (goal, assist) and Cole Sillinger (goal, assist).

Edmonton will also finish this game without its captain, as Connor McDavid was injured (left leg/ankle) on his first shift of the game.

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) makes a save in front of Edmonton Oilers center Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (93) and Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen (2) during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

**1st period, 17:33:** Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid injured, won't return

The Oilers have announced late in the first period that superstar Connor McDavid won't return to this game due to a lower-body injury. McDavid played just one shift and 0:37 seconds.

McDavid was injured after he was tripped up by Werenski entering the Blue Jackets' zone on the right wing.

Edmonton Oilers center Connor McDavid (97) stands for the National Anthem prior to the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

No penalty was called for a trip, which sent the Oilers superstar center to the ice and sliding feet first into the right half wall. McDavid's left skate appeared to strike the yellow kick plate at the bottom of the wall, causing the injury.

**GOAL, 1st period, 14:32:** Columbus Blue Jackets 3, Edmonton Oilers 0

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli (19) and defenseman Zach Werenski (8) celebrate a goal by center Cole Sillinger (4) during the first period of the NHL hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

Is this de ja vu, all over again?

Just as they did last week against Toronto, the Blue Jackets have already prompted the "Chili!" chant at Nationwide Arena on a 3-0 lead with five-plus minutes remaining in the first period. Cole Sillinger gets credit for throwing the puck at the net front the left point. It looked like Mikael Pyyhtia might've got his stick on the puck to deflect it, but he quickly shook his head to let Sillinger know the goal belonged to him.

For now, it's Sillinger's second goal of the season and second point of the first period (goal, assist). Assists to Fantilli (goal, assist) and Werenski (two assists), who also have two points each.

**GOAL:** 1st period, 10:44: Columbus Blue Jackets 2, Edmonton Oilers 0

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli (19) celebrates scoring a goal with center Cole Sillinger (4) during the first period of the NHL hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

Adam Fantilli gets on the board with a goal, pushing the Blue Jackets' margin to 2-0 with a snap shot from the slot off a nice feed from Cole Sillinger standing below the goal line. Columbus, as happened in the Jackets' 6-2 rout of the Toronto Maple Leafs here last week, is outworking Edmonton early.

**GOAL, 1st period, 2:18:** Columbus Blue Jackets 1, Edmonton Oilers 0

Sean Monahan pots his fourth goal of the season to cap a power play, giving Kirill Marchenko and Zach Werenski points with the assists.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan (23) scores past Edmonton Oilers goaltender Stuart Skinner (74) during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

Pretty play to set it up, Werenski from the left point over to Marchenko on the right wing for a shot/pass to Monahan for a redirection past Skinner from the slot past. That's a bumper goal.

**1st period:** Columbus Blue Jackets vs Edmonton Oilers underway

The puck is down here in Columbus for the Blue Jackets and Oilers, who are a couple shifts into it with a 0-0 score. Blue Jackets are getting an early power play after Viktor Arvidsson takes out Merzlikins' pins behind the Columbus net.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets lineup vs Edmonton Oilers**

#### **Forward lines**

Yegor Chinakhov — Sean Monahan — Kirill Marchenko

Mikael Pyyhtia — Adam Fantilli — Cole Sillinger

Zach Aston-Reese — Justin Danforth — Mathieu Olivier

James van Riemsdyk — Sean Kuraly — Kevin Labanc

#### **Defense pairings**

Zach Werenski — Ivan Provorov

Jake Christiansen — Damon Severson

Jack Johnson — Jordan Harris

#### **Goalies**

Elvis Merzlikins

Daniil Tarasov

**Scratched:** D David Jiricek

Mar 7, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Edmonton Oilers center Connor McDavid (97) steals the puck from Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Kirill Marchenko (86) during the third period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets won 4-2.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets vs Edmonton Oilers morning skate news**

The Oilers won 3-2 on Sunday in Detroit, so they didn't hold a morning skate at Nationwide Arena on Monday. This is the fifth time in the Blue Jackets' first eight games they're getting an opponent finishing a back-to-back set that started 24 hours earlier. Edmonton started goalie Calvin Pickard against the Red Wings, so the Blue Jackets are expected to face Stuart Skinner.

Columbus had multiple players option out of taking the morning skate due to illness, so the Jackets could have multiple lineup regulars missing. Injured forward Dmitri Voronkov (shoulder) participated in the skate and continues to make progress in his recovery.

Mar 7, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov (9) fights for the flying puck with Edmonton Oilers center Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (93) during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena.

## **Columbus Blue Jackets senior advisor John Davidson returns to booth as TV analyst against Edmonton Oilers**

John Davidson's non-playing career began in a TV booth as a broadcast analyst for the New York Rangers, whom he'd played for as a star goalie most of his career. He also became a beloved national TV analyst before leaving the booth for a lengthy executive career with the St. Louis Blues, Rangers and Blue Jackets, with whom he's on his second stint.

After playing a role in hiring Don Waddell in late May as the Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, Davidson shifted from that role into a senior advisory position. That comes with much less day-to-day responsibility for hockey operations, which frees Davidson up to rejoin the TV booth in this game with Steve Mears, the team's replacement for retired play-by-play broadcaster Jeff Rimer.

The Jackets' regular broadcast analyst, Jody Shelley, is working the Prime Canada Monday Night Hockey national game between the Winnipeg Jets and Toronto Maple Leafs at Canada Life Centre in Winnipeg.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets vs Edmonton Oilers history**

**All-time record:** The Blue Jackets are 26-35-3 with three ties against Edmonton, including (17-13-3 with 1 one tie at Nationwide Arena, where the Oilers haven't won since Oct. 30, 2019.

**Last meeting:** The Blue Jackets won 4-2 on March 7, 2024 in Columbus, splitting the two-game season series on goals from Mathieu Olivier, Alexander Nylander, Dmitri Voronkov and Jack Roslovic. Tarasov stopped 29 of 31 shots for the goaltending win. Zach Hyman and Corey Perry scored goals for the Oilers, who had Calvin Pickard in net.

**2024 matchups:** Oct. 28 in Columbus; Dec. 5, 2024 in Edmonton.

Who are the officials for tonight's Columbus Blue Jackets vs Edmonton Oilers game?

**Referee:** Justin Kea (36)

**Referee:** Frederick L'Ecuyer (17)

**Lines official:** Ben O'Quinn (91)

**Lines official:** Julien Fournier (56)

Oct 3, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Dmitri Voronkov (10) collides with Pittsburgh Penguins right wing Sam Poulin (22) early during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena. Voronkov did not return to action after the collision.

**Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' schedule for October, along with start times, television, and radio information of upcoming games:**

**Thursday, Oct. 10:** Blue Jackets at Wild (L, 3-2); Takeaways

**Saturday, Oct. 12:** Blue Jackets at Avalanche (W, 6-4); Takeaways

**Tuesday, Oct. 15:** Blue Jackets vs. Panthers (L, 4-3); Takeaways

**Thursday, Oct. 17:** Blue Jackets vs. Sabres (W, 6-4); Takeaways

**Saturday, Oct. 19:** Blue Jackets vs. Wild (L, 3-1); Takeaways

**Tuesday, Oct. 22:** Blue Jackets vs. Maple Leafs (W, 6-2); Takeaways

**Saturday, Oct 26:** Blue Jackets at Predators (OTL, 4-3); Takeaways

**Columbus Blue Jackets vs Edmonton Oilers start time**

**Date:** Monday, Oct. 28 **Time:** 7 p.m. **Location:** Nationwide Arena (Columbus, Ohio)

## The Athletic / Mikael Pyyhtiä finally breaks through in Blue Jackets' 6-1 rout of Edmonton

**By Aaron Portzline – October 29, 2024**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets are quickly but quietly becoming one of the early-season success stories in the NHL, a club that was expected to settle immediately to the bottom of the standings and endure another dreadful season on the way to another lottery pick.

There is a long way to go, but the Blue Jackets are playing with a pace and a passion that, if sustained, should carry them a long way as an upstart club this season.

They simply overwhelmed the Edmonton Oilers — yes, the Stanley Cup runners-up just four months ago — by taking a 3-0 lead after one period and cruising to a 6-1 win before 15,227 in Nationwide Arena. The Oilers' only goal was scored with 26.8 seconds remaining in the game.

There were many superlatives to go around. Elvis Merzlikins, playing his first game in 13 days, had 31 saves and nearly his 11th career shutout. Sean Monahan had two goals, Cole Sillinger had a goal and two assists, and Adam Fantilli had a goal and an assist.

It was the fourth time this season — all wins — that the Blue Jackets (4-3-1) have scored six goals in a game.

But the best story of the night came to life at 15:15 of the third period, when Sillinger, Fantilli and Mikael Pyyhtiä combined on a beautiful sequence of passing that led to Pyyhtiä scoring the first goal of his career. Fantilli's backward pass through a forest of legs reached Pyyhtiä coming through the right circle.

The great wait is done. Pyyhtiä was playing in his 27th NHL game. Incredibly, Pyyhtiä hadn't even had a shot on goal this season before taking three in Saturday's 4-3 overtime loss in Nashville.

"You remember that for the rest of your life," Pyyhtiä said, "It feels awesome. Everyone told me to 'shoot more, shoot more, you have a good shot.' Now I've shot more (the last two games) and now it's come."

Then he paused for comedic timing.

"I probably need to shoot more," Pyyhtiä said.

The Blue Jackets bench erupted when Pyyhtiä scored, jumping off the bench to bang their stick on the other side of the wall. On the ice, Sillinger chased after Pyyhtiä for a huge hug as Fantilli pointed repeatedly and emphatically at the net, notifying officials that the Jackets wanted to pull the puck from the game.

Sillinger ended up grabbing it and skating it safely to the bench, which is fitting. Pyyhtiä (pronounced PYOO-tee-uh) sits two locker stalls down from Sillinger, which leads to pre-game chats as they're taping their sticks or lacing their skates.

"We talk about (Pyyhtiä) scoring every game," Sillinger said, chuckling. "We'll be taping our sticks and I'll be like, 'Are you getting it tonight, Pits?' He always tells me yeah. So tonight he didn't lie to me."

Others had premonitions, too.

"I walked in before the game and I told him I'd been thinking about it all day, like he had to get one tonight," Fantilli said. "He said, 'Adam, I'm actually feeling it too.'"



“As soon as he tucked it in, I was pumped behind the net. I’m so pumped for him. We came into the room after the game, and he said, ‘I’m not sleeping tonight.’ I told him I didn’t, either (when I scored my first goal).”

It is said you’re not yet friends with someone until you have a nickname. If that’s the case, Pyyhtiä is already a beloved player in the dressing room.

He is known in one corner of the dressing room as Tuna (no explanation given). He is known in another as Python and yet another as Pits (no explanation needed).

After Monday’s win, he was presented with the postgame donkey hat as the players’ choice for player of the game.

“(Pyyhtiä) does a lot of right things on our hockey club,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “He’s earned the right to be here, to be in the NHL and to play a significant role on our team. Is it nice to see somebody get rewarded for scoring a goal, helping his team? Yeah.”

Truth be told, there were a few players who could have worn the donkey.

Merzlikins got hammered by Edmonton’s Viktor Arvidsson only 1:36 into the game when Merzlikins went behind the net to play a puck. Not an ideal way for an injured player to return to the lineup ... or was it?

“It was a good shot,” Merzlikins said with a smile. “It’s a good thing. It made me feel (into the game). It’s what I was looking for.”

Merzlikins had his strongest out of the season. It wasn’t until Ekholm scored in the final minute that his first shutout since Jan. 30 of last season was lost. Merzlikins slammed his stick against the net in frustration.

Evason tweaked his lines after a rough night in Nashville over the weekend, and the results were an instant success.

Fantilli centered Sillinger and Pyyhtiä and all three players scored. Fantilli gave the Jackets a 2-0 lead at 10:44 of the first when he quick-ripped a pass from below the goal line from Sillinger. Sillinger scored an unassisted goal through traffic from just inside the blue line at 14:32 to make it 3-0.

There was a lot to like for the Blue Jackets on Monday. There’s been a lot to like so far this season. Evason put a stamp on it after the game.

“We talked after the game that a shutout is wonderful,” Evason said. “A hat trick is wonderful. Scoring your first goal is wonderful. But the most wonderful and important thing is the two points and the win.”

## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets kick off busy week vs. Oilers](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 29, 2024

### **BLUE JACKETS (3-3-1) vs. OILERS (4-4-1), 7 PM, NATIONWIDE ARENA**

Sometimes in the NHL, you lose a game because the energy just isn't there. Sometimes, you don't win because you don't execute properly.

For the Blue Jackets, Saturday night in Nashville was one of the latter setbacks. Columbus brought the effort but made enough mistakes to see a third-period lead disappear in a 4-3 overtime loss to the Predators.

The Blue Jackets did a lot of good things, but head coach Dean Evason was left disappointed by his team's inability to limit Nashville's opportunities after taking a 2-0 lead in the second period.

"We were impressed (by how we settled things down late), but we were unimpressed with how we played when we had a two-goal lead," Evason said. "We turned the puck over constantly and gave them an opportunity to come back at us, and we have to manage the game a hell of a lot better than we did in those situations. The game should have been cleaner than it was, and it wasn't clean here tonight.

"For the most part, to be honest with you, we liked our game, like we liked how we played. We limited a lot of their opportunities. When we didn't turn it over, we were a really good hockey club. When we did, we were very, very average."

The good news is Columbus was able to get a point in a venue that has been a challenge over the years, and there were still plenty of things to build on. The Blue Jackets played the aggressive, fast-paced style they've been touting in the early season, and they got scoring again, with tallies from the top six (Kirill Marchenko), bottom six (Zach Aston-Reese) and the blue line (Zach Werenski).

"I thought we played hard," Werenski said after the game. "Sometimes we didn't really maybe play smart, but we definitely played well enough to get two points. It just didn't work out tonight."

The Blue Jackets won't have long to think about that one, though, with a busy week coming up. Columbus kicks off a stretch of four games in six days – including three at home – tonight with reigning Western Conference champion Edmonton coming to town.

The goal will be to play with the same effort but limit the mistakes against an Oilers team with some of the top weapons in the NHL.

"We're gonna have to watch the tape and kind of figure it out, maybe some details here and there," Mathieu Olivier said postgame in Nashville. "I thought we generated chances and gave ourselves a chance to win here. So we get a point. We'll take it and go back home for the next game."

### **Know The Foe: Edmonton Oilers**

**Head coach:** Kris Knoblauch (Second season)

**Team stats:** Goals per game: 2.33 (30th) | Scoring defense: 3.22 (17th) | PP: 13.0 percent (27th) | PK: 60.0 percent (32nd)

**The narrative:** Boasting two of the superstars of the game in Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton has continuously built over the years but still hasn't been able to hoist the elusive Stanley Cup, coming within a game of it a season ago but losing Game 7 of the Final vs. Florida. It's been a bit of a slow start for the Oilers, just as it was last year, but it still feels like they'll be in the mix at the end.

They may be finding their groove, too, winning two straight including last night's 3-2 overtime triumph at Detroit.

**Team leaders:** McDavid and Draisaitl combined for 73 goals and 238 points a season ago, and they again lead the way as McDavid has three goals and 10 points with Draisaitl posting six goals among his 10 points. Mattias Ekholm has a goal among his seven points, while Evan Bouchard – coming off a season in which his 82 points were fourth among NHL defensemen – has a 3-3-6 line.

Stuart Skinner is in line to get the start in Columbus after cementing himself as the No. 1 the past two seasons. He's 2-3-1 this year with a 3.06 GAA and .890 save percentage.

**What's new:** Edmonton made some changes in the offseason, acquiring veteran goal scorer Jeff Skinner from Buffalo for young center Ryan McLeod and signing Viktor Arvidsson in free agency. It hasn't paid off yet – Skinner has two goals while Arvidsson is yet to light the lamp – but the two could add some secondary scoring as the year goes by. It hasn't helped that Evander Kane is on injured reserve with an abdominal injury, and the team also lost young center Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg to St. Louis via offer sheet over the summer.

**Trending:** The teams split the two games a year ago, with Edmonton winning 4-1 at home and Columbus taking a 4-2 victory in Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets have won three straight against the Oilers in Nationwide Arena.

**Former CBJ:** None

#### **Projected Lineup (Subject to change)**

LW 4 Cole Sillinger	C 23 Sean Monahan	RW 86 Kirill Marchenko
LW 59 Yegor Chinakhov	C 19 Adam Fantilli	RW 82 Mikael Pyyhtia
LW 21 James van Riemsdyk	C 7 Sean Kuraly	RW 62 Kevin Labanc
LW 27 Zach Aston-Reese	C 17 Justin Danforth	RW 24 Mathieu Olivier
LD 8 Zach Werenski	RD 9 Ivan Provorov	G 90 Elvis Merzlikins (starter)
LD 2 Jake Christiansen	RD 78 Damon Severson	G 40 Daniil Tarasov
LD 3 Jack Johnson	RD 22 Jordan Harris	

**Scratches:** Kent Johnson (upper body), David Jiricek

**Injured reserve, Injured/Non-Roster list:** Erik Gudbranson (upper body), Boone Jenner (upper body), Dmitri Voronkov (upper body), Gavin Brindley (finger)

**Roster Report:** The Blue Jackets have some players under the weather so the lineup is in flux before tonight's game. Merzlikins will get the start, though, in net.

#### **The Numbers Game**

Twelve different Blue Jackets have a goal and 19 have points on the season. ... The Blue Jackets' 27 goals through seven games are a franchise record, and the team has scored in 16 of 21 regulation periods this season. ... Kirill Marchenko has scored in four of the last six games and has a 4-5-9 line in that span. ...

Mathieu Olivier has a 3-2-5 line in the last four games, while Zach Werenski has a 1-4-5 line in that span. ... Columbus has rotated wins and losses in seven-straight games to start the campaign, marking the longest stretch to begin a season in club history. ... Sean Monahan is two assists away from 300 in his NHL career and three goals from 250, while Damon Severson is five points away from 300.

### **This Day in CBJ History**

**Oct. 28, 2005:** Adam Foote scores at 19:18 of the third period and Trevor Letowski gets the tiebreaking winner in the eighth round of the shootout as the Blue Jackets take a 2-1 victory over Minnesota in Nationwide Arena. It was the first shootout victory in team history, as Mark Hartigan scored the first shootout goal for the franchise and goalie Martin Prusek stopped seven of eight Wild shots against.

**Oct. 28, 2016:** Sergei Bobrovsky posts his second shutout in seven days' time, making 35 saves in a 4-0 victory at Anaheim.

**Oct. 28, 2022:** First-round draft pick David Jiricek, 18, makes his NHL debut in a game vs. Boston in Nationwide Arena, becoming the second-youngest defenseman to do so in club history after Rostislav Klesla.

## [BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets blow by Oilers for 6-1 win](#)

**By Craig Merz – October 29, 2024**

COLUMBUS -- Connor McDavid sustained a lower-body injury on his first shift when the Edmonton Oilers lost 6-1 to the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Monday.

"He's going to go back to Edmonton," Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch said. "He's going to get evaluated and I'll have something later tomorrow."

The Oilers play against the Nashville Predators at Bridgestone Arena on Thursday.

McDavid left the game after he was tripped by Zach Werenski along the right boards while trying to enter the offensive zone during his 37-second opening shift. He appeared to be favoring his left leg while skating to the Oilers bench.

Edmonton ruled him out for the rest of the game midway through the first period. McDavid (three goals, seven assists) is tied with Leon Draisaitl for first on the Oilers with 10 points this season.

"He's our leader and also the best player in the game," Oilers forward Ryan Nugent-Hopkins said. "So of course, you're going to feel it. We've got to do a better job of stepping up when a guy like that goes down."

Sean Monahan scored twice, Cole Sillinger had a goal and two assists and Adam Fantilli and Kirill Marchenko each had two points for the Blue Jackets (4-3-1).

"We're not going to win every night," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We're not going to (always) have success, but we're going to work every night and we've done that up to this point. We've got to continue to do it."

Elvis Merzlikins, who was making his first start since Oct. 15, made 31 saves. He lost his shutout bid with 27 seconds remaining in the third period.

"I definitely had help from those guys cleaning the guys who were in front of me, my vision," he said. "It definitely feels good."

Mattias Ekholm scored, and Stuart Skinner made 19 saves for the Oilers (4-5-1), who defeated the Detroit Red Wings 3-2 in overtime on Sunday.

Edmonton is 4-2-1 in its past seven games following a 0-3-0 start.

"Overall, a lot of battles we should have won," Nugent-Hopkins said. "We know that they're a fast team to capitalize on little breakdowns and that's what we saw."

Monahan made it 1-0 at 2:18 of the first period with a power-play goal, redirecting Marchenko's shot past Skinner.

Fantilli scored at 10:44 of the first to make it 2-0 with a one-timer from close range off a pass by Sillinger from the left corner.

Sillinger upped the lead to 3-0 at 14:32 with a wrist shot from the point through traffic after a giveaway at the blue line.

"We talked about within our power play to execute," Sillinger said. "It's been a couple of games, so to get one early there. ... We get rolling and get a couple there."

Mathieu Olivier made it 4-0 at 7:04 of the second period. He stole the puck in the right corner and fed James van Riemsdyk in front, but Olivier ultimately pounced on the loose puck for his fourth goal this season.

“We’re really happy with the start, and even more happy after we got up the three goals after the first period,” Evason said. “We played the proper way and obviously scored a few more goals. We didn’t turn the puck over as much.”

Mikael Pyyhtia scored his first NHL goal in his 27th NHL game at 15:15 of the third period from Fantilli to make it 5-0.

“That first goal, you’ll remember all your life so that feels awesome,” Pyyhtia said. “I feel so happy. I was like, ‘Finally, it came.’”

Monahan scored at 16:39 to make it 6-0.

Ekholm scored on the power play at 19:33 for the 6-1 final.

**Notes:** The Blue Jackets scored six goals for the fourth time this season, which is tied with the Vegas Golden Knights for the most in the NHL. ... Marchenko extended his point streak to three games (two goals, three assists). ... Ekholm extended his point streak to three games (two goals, three assists). ... Oilers forward Leon Draisaitl had his six-game point streak snapped. ... The Oilers went 1-for-6 on the power play on Monday.

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Pyyhtia's goal highlights victory over Edmonton](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 29, 2024

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

### **1. How can you not be happy for Tuna?**

Mikael Pyyhtia is naturally a quiet guy, but it's fair to say that guys love playing with him. Talk to any CBJ player or those who skated with him in Cleveland a season ago, and Pyyhtia is the kind of guy you root for.

And on a night where there was plenty to celebrate for the Blue Jackets, the most palpable joy came when the 22-year-old forward scored his first NHL goal in his 27th game at the highest level.

Adam Fantilli found him through a maze of Oilers defenders and Pyyhtia didn't miss, having nothing but an open cage to shoot into to give the Jackets a 5-0 lead in the third period. It was a fitting assist for Fantilli considering he showed up at the rink and all but told the man they call "Tuna" that he was getting his first goal.

"I came in before the game and I told him, I was thinking about it all day – he had to get one tonight," Fantilli said. "He was like, 'Yeah, I'm actually feeling it too.' As soon as he tucked it in, I was pumped behind the net. I was pointing at the net, making sure someone picked (the puck) up.

"I'm pumped for him. You never forget your first goal. I walked in the dry stall (after the game) and he said, 'I'm not sleeping tonight.' I was like, 'I didn't either. You're gonna remember it forever.'"

The man of the hour confirmed it with a thousand-watt smile on his face and a donkey hat in his locker stall.

"It feels awesome," Pyyhtia said. "First goal, you'll remember that all your life. I felt that (I would score) too in the morning, and (Fantilli) said, 'I feel you can score one today.' I was like, 'I feel it too.' That was a funny moment."

The funny thing is that Pyyhtia was a pretty good goal scorer in his native Finland. The fourth-round pick in the 2020 draft had 21 goals in 2021-22 with TPS in his home country, but he had found paydirt hard to come by at the start of his NHL career despite drawing rave reviews from coaches and teammates alike for his solid play all over the ice.

It helped that he's started to shoot the puck more in the last two games. After zero shots on goal in the Jackets' first six games this season, he had three on Saturday night in Nashville – including nearly winning the game late in regulation – and two more Monday night.

And, of course, one that went in.

"Everyone told me, 'Shoot more, shoot more. You have a good shot,'" he said. "Now I shoot more, and now (the goal) came. I probably need to shoot more."

### **2. It was a memorable night for his whole line as well.**

Head coach Dean Evason made a switcheroo with the top two trios Monday night, reuniting the "Monahanov" line of Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko and slotting Cole Sillinger with Fantilli and Pyyhtia.

On a night when the Blue Jackets scored six goals for the fourth time in eight games, it paid off. Monahan had a pair of goals, including one on the power play to get things started in the opening minutes, and every member of the Sillinger-Fantilli-Pyyhtia line scored.

For Sillinger and Fantilli, there was an immediate connection. The two played just over 11 minutes together at 5-on-5 a season ago and were on a line together Monday for the first time this season, but the production quickly clicked as both Fantilli and Sillinger tallied in the first period.

Adam Fantilli with a Goal vs. Edmonton Oilers

“To actually be on a line, we were pretty pumped this morning,” Sillinger said. “I think we have chemistry, and we complement each other well, so I thought we showed that tonight. We both want it for each other. We both want to do well, and we both want this team to do well, so it’s nice for us to click. We just have to keep that going.”

If they can, it’ll give the Blue Jackets two top scoring lines that are hard to handle for opposing teams.

“Anytime you can have waves of offense coming in like that, it’s gonna be great,” Fantilli said. “Playing with Silly and Tuna, it’s hopefully something where we can establish the first two lines of offense.”

### **3. Elvis Merzlikins made bit of a statement in this one as well.**

Daniil Tarasov had started the previous four games in goal – two of them when Merzlikins was out with an upper body injury – and Evason had talked about how Tarasov's play had earned him that time between the pipes.

Merzlikins will thus earn some more opportunities of his own after stopping 31 of 32 shots against Edmonton and coming just seconds away from a shutout when the Oilers scored a power-play goal in the final 30 seconds.

More than just making the saves, Merzlikins was square to shooters and played with a composed demeanor, letting the play come to him rather than trying to do anything spectacular. The result was his best performance of the young season.

“It definitely feels good,” he said afterward. “I had help from the guys cleaning those guys who were in the front of me, in my vision, but it feels good. I just have to catch that flow and that wave. I didn’t play hockey for two weeks. I was mostly all the time every day in the gym and in the Ice Haus (rehabbing and practicing).

“It was frustrating to start the season like this, especially when the boys have success and you can’t join that feeling.”

But if there has been some frustration with the injury, Merzlikins hasn’t shown it, Evason said.

“Elvis has been a leader on our team so far,” the head coach said. “He’s led by example. He’s led in practice. He’s led with his work ethic. The other night when he’s not playing, he’s the first one high-fiving guys and praising guys. He’s been fantastic.

“I think your point of him being calm (in net) is really good. We want him to have fire in his belly, we just don’t want him to have fire all the time. We want him to play the game composed, as we want everybody, but certainly our goaltenders. And he did that tonight.”



## The Hockey News / Money Puck Shows That The Blue Jackets Top Line Has Been Elite Offensively

**By Jason Newland – October 29, 2024**

Per MoneyPuck.com, the Jackets' first line of Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan, and Kirill Marchenko have been ridiculously good.

How good? The line is tops in the league in xGoals %(79.6%), xGoals Against(1), and xGoals against Per 60(0.98).

The one stat from Money Puck that really stands out is the Goals against per 60 minutes. It shows them giving up less than one goal per 60 minutes played while the three of them are on the ice together. So, not only are they good on offense, they've been good on defense as well.

This line has been elite, to say the least. But if you've watched the games, you already know this.

Let's take a look at each player's actual stats through 7 games.

**Kirill Marchenko** - 4g-5a-9p | +5 | 19 shots - 21.1% shooting %

**Sean Monahan** - 3g-4a-7p | +2 | 24 shots - 12.5% shooting %

**Yegor Chinakhov** - 3g-4a-7p | +4 | 21 shots - 14.3% shooting %

This line was recently separated as Dean Evason moved Yegor Chinakhov to the second line in an attempt to spread out the scoring a bit. It was also done to try to jump-start Adam Fantilli. Fantilli only has 3 points through 7 games, with two of those points being goals. Although Fantilli hasn't been scoring goals, he's putting pucks at the goalies. He has 21 shots through 7 games.

The Jackets are 3-3-1 in the young season and have been competitive in every game except one. They have been exceeding expectations so far, which is very good to see.

**What's Next** - Columbus is back home Monday to face Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets (7 pts) vs. Edmonton Oilers (9 pts) Game Preview

**By Jason Newland – October 29, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets are back home tonight after a quick 1-game trip to Nashville.

The Jackets welcome the Edmonton Oilers into the friendly confines tonight and will try to halt the Oilers' modest 2-game winning streak. Edmonton has stumbled out of the gate and currently sits at 4-4-1 due to subpar goaltending and lack of scoring.

Edmonton is currently 29th in goals after scoring just 21 goals in their 9 games played, which equates to 2.33 goals scored per game. That doesn't seem possible with the players they have. Conversely, Columbus is 16th in the league in goals scored at 27, which is 3.85 goals per game. The universe seems upside down, doesn't it?

The Oilers' power play is also bad right now at 13%, with Columbus sitting one spot better than them in 26th. Edmonton also has the worst PK in the league at 60%, while the Jackets sit in 13th with a kill rate of 80%.

Edmonton currently sits 5th in the Pacific, 9th in the West, and 20th in the NHL.

### **Series History vs. The Oilers**

- Columbus is 17-13-3-1 all-time vs. the Oilers at NWA.
- The CBJ are 8-3-0 in the last 11 games against Edmonton.
- The Jackets have won 4 of the last 5 games overall.

### **Who To Watch For The Oilers**

- Connor McDavid has 8 points in 8 games this season.
- Leon Draisaitl has 7 points in 8 games.
- Goalie Calvin Pickard is 1-1 with a .852 save %. He beat the Detroit Red Wings on Sunday night and made 24 saves.
- Stuart Skinner is 2-3 with a .890 save %. Skinner should be getting the start tonight against the Jackets.

### **CBJ Player Notes vs. The Oilers**

- Sean Monahan has 25 points in 43 career games against Edmonton.
- Zach Werenski has 6 points in 10 games.
- Jordan Harris has 3 points in 3 games in his career against the Oilers.

### **Injuries**

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (7 Games)
- **Dmitri Voronkov** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 4; (7 Games)
- **Gavin Brindley** (broken finger) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 3; (7 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (4 Games)

- **Kent Johnson** (upper body); (3 Games)

**TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 33**

**How to Watch & Listen:** Tonight's game will be on FanDuel Sports Network. Steve Mears will be on the play-by-play. The radio broadcast will be on 97.1 The Fan with Bob McElligott behind the mic doing the play-by-play.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier Proving He's More Than Just an Enforcer

By William Espy – October 29, 2024

Since joining the Columbus Blue Jackets for the 2022-23 season, Mathieu Olivier has made a name for himself as one of the toughest players in the NHL. His grit and willingness to protect his teammates made him a mainstay on the Blue Jackets' fourth line. So far this season though, we've seen a different version of the Biloxi, Mississippi native.

close

### **Mathieu Olivier: One Tough Customer**

The NHL's age of the enforcer is largely in the past, but it has seen a bit of a resurgence in recent years. Players like Matt Rempe and Arber Xhekaj have made it necessary for every team to have someone who can protect their star players. Olivier has filled that role for the Blue Jackets since being traded to Columbus for a 2022 fourth-round draft pick, and he's quickly become respected around the league for his toughness.

Despite mainly being known for his grit, Olivier has also been a reliable defensive player during his time in Columbus. He certainly wasn't one of Pascal Vincent's top options for important defensive situations, nor has he been for Dean Evason either. With that being said though, he could hold his own and the coaches knew that. Under the Blue Jackets' new coach this season, he's found a whole new side of his game as well.

### **Increased Offensive Production**

Considering Olivier's ice time is at an all-time high this season under Evason, it's no surprise that he has been on the best run of his career offensively. His current pace is certainly not sustainable since at this rate he'd finish with 35 goals and 58 points over the course of a full 82-game season, but he's playing with confidence unlike anything we've seen from him before.

In seven games this season, Olivier has scored three goals and assisted on two others. He's had two multi-point performances already as well. He recorded a goal and an assist against the Buffalo Sabres in a 6-4 win on Oct. 17, before scoring two goals, including the game-winning goal, in a 6-2 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs just five days later. Most recently, the 27-year-old assisted on a Zach Aston-Reese goal. The pass to Aston-Reese seemed unintentional as it appeared Olivier was attempting to set up for a shot, but it was arguably one of the most beautiful plays we've seen from him so far.

Prior to this season, Olivier's best offensive season came in 2022-23 when he scored five goals and put up a total of 15 points in 66 games. On a points-per-game basis, he was actually better offensively during the 2023-24 season when he had 12 points in just 54 games.

While his numbers aren't going to be sustainable, Olivier has shown that he can be an offensive threat for the Blue Jackets when needed. Even though it would be quite a jump, 25-30 points could be realistic if he has another similar hot streak and doesn't completely fall off between those streaks.

Olivier is making himself a key part of the Blue Jackets' bottom-six forward group. In prior years, it was his toughness and grit that kept him in their lineup on a regular basis. Now it's quickly becoming clear that he's not a one-dimensional enforcer. He's a talented player who can contribute on the offensive side of the game when given the opportunity. Although he's not the type of player that Evason would

ever want having a top-six forward role, Olivier's turning into a solid depth-scoring option. The only thing that remains to be seen is whether this is a flash in the pan, or if he's able to truly become a 25 to 30-point player over the course of a full season.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Defeat Oilers as McDavid Leaves With Lower-Body Injury

**By Mark Scheig – October 29, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the Edmonton Oilers by a final score of 6-1. However, the big story of the night is the status of Connor McDavid.

McDavid had to leave the game after playing one shift in the first period due to a lower-body injury. He was tripped by the Blue Jackets bench and his left skate hit the boards awkwardly. It was announced soon after that he wouldn't return for the night.

Postgame according to head coach Kris Knoblauch, McDavid will be going back to Edmonton to be evaluated. "He's gonna go back to Edmonton. He's gonna get evaluated and I'll have something later tomorrow."

### **Game Recap**

The Blue Jackets struck for three goals in the first period from Sean Monahan, Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger. Sillinger had two points in the first period as he assisted on Fantilli's goal.

The Blue Jackets extended the lead to 4-0 early in the second period on a goal by Mathieu Olivier. His four goals this season puts him one shy of his career high of five just eight games into the season.

Monahan added his second goal of the night and then Mikael Pyyhtia added his first NHL goal in the third. Mattias Ekholm got a late power-play goal to get to the final score of 6-1. Elvis Merzlikins made 31 saves on the night.

The Oilers has numerous chances to get back into the game thanks to special teams. However, their normally-potent power play went 1 for 6 on the night.

With the win, the Blue Jackets improve to 4-3-1 on the season. They've now won five of their last six games against the Oilers dating back to April 2022.

Up next for the Blue Jackets is a home game against the New York Islanders on Wednesday. As for the Oilers, they get two days off after playing back-to-back in Detroit and Columbus and will play the Nashville Predators on Thursday night.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Domination: Blue Jackets Score A Half Dozen Yet Again, Roll Edmonton Oilers 6-1

By Ed Francis – October 29, 2024

Elvis Merzlikins came within a minute of a shutout and the Columbus Blue Jackets scored six times yet again as they move to 4-3-1 on the season with a 6-1 victory over the Edmonton Oilers.

The Blue Jackets scored in all three periods — making it 19 of 24 regulation periods this season that they've scored a goal, including 11 multi-goal periods.

Sean Monahan scored twice, Mathieu Olivier got his fourth of the season, and Mikael Pyyhtia picked up the first goal of his career in the blowout.

Merzlikins was named the first star of the game for his efforts, stopping 31 of 32 shots.

**Here's how it all went down in the five-goal win:**

### **1st Period**

**(0:37 — McDavid Goes Down):** Really tough break in the first minute of the game for Edmonton, as Connor McDavid goes down on the first shift of the game and leaves the ice. He would not return (lower-body injury).

**(2:18 — 1-0 CBJ):** Columbus' first power play of the night is short-lived. After Viktor Arvidsson goes off for tripping Elvis Merzlikins at 1:36, the Blue Jackets quickly establish the zone and get the Oilers penalty kill out of sorts. Marchenko gets a shot off that is deflected perfectly by Monahan, who buries it. Werenski picks up the secondary assist.

**(10:44 — 2-0 CBJ):** The Blue Jackets fifth shot of the night results in the second goal. This starts with a turnover in Columbus quickly turns aggressive in getting the puck up the ice — a theme for the team this year. Sillinger fires it wide of the net but plays the puck wonderfully off the boards and finds Fantilli at close range, who beats Oilers goalie Stuart Skinner glove-side to double the lead.

**(14:32 — 3-0 CBJ):** An assist on the Fantilli goal for Sillinger, but Cole picks up a goal of his own here to give the Blue Jackets their third goal of the opening period. Sillinger was hanging out near the blue line in front of the Edmonton bench and ends up with the puck on a weak clearing attempt by the Oilers. He throws it at the net and it gets by Skinner to make it 3-0 Columbus.

The goal was officially unassisted, but Fantilli's play here in the seconds before the goal were imperative to the goal itself. He took the puck most of the way down the ice and flipped it front of the net as he went behind

### **2nd Period**

**(7:04 — 4-0 CBJ):** The Blue Jackets held the zone for a more than a minute after a power play had expired and Olivier scores on a looser puck to extend the Blue Jackets lead to 4-0. James van Riemsdyk gets the assist — and a lot of JVR's goal in his veteran career came in exactly the way in which Olivier gets this one.

### **3rd Period**

**(15:15 — 5-0 CBJ):** A night in which everything was going the Blue Jackets way gets even better as Pyyhtia buries the first goal of his NHL career.

**(16:39 — 6-0 CBJ):** Just vibin' at this point. The Chinakhov-Monahan-Marchenko line, reunited for the first time in a few games, connects. Monahan's second goal of the night with Chinny & Marchy goin' apple picking for the assists.

**(19:33 — 6-1 CBJ):** Less than a half minute left in the game and after Jake Christiansen heads to the box for a cross-check, the Oilers get their only goal to take away Elvis' shutout.

**Up Next:**

The workweek homestand continues when the Blue Jackets battle the New York Islanders at Nationwide Arena on Wednesday night. Puck drop is slated for 7:00 p.m. This will be the first divisional game of the young season.



## The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: Jets unbeatable, Bruins a question mark, Penguins a mess

By Sean McIndoe – October 29, 2024

If you're a hockey fan and love power rankings, you got some great news a few days ago: The Friday rankings have returned.

There's a common misconception that there's some sort of rivalry between those rankings and these ones. But there isn't, because we're trying to do different things. These rankings are the long-term view, while the Friday boys are more of an immediate snapshot. I do my thing, Dom and Other Sean do theirs, and the readers win. A rivalry? Not even close.

They were a few weeks late to the season, though, especially since we've already been hard at work on two weeks' worth of rankings under our belt. I wonder why that was. Let's see what they had to say about that:

"Sure, we could've assembled our little list last week — but there were teams that had only played three games. It felt wrong. Integrity counts, professionally and personally, and some sample sizes are simply too small."

(Does an extended Kubrick Stare off into the middle distance like Gary Roberts before a playoff game.)

Integrity? Fine, a rivalry it is. Here are five issues I had with the first set of rankings from those two Taylor Swift lyric-loving weirdos.

**Bonus five:** Things those dumb Friday guys got wrong in their initial rankings

**5.** They had the Capitals in the top 10 — Sorry, I'm not buying it, even with a 5-1-0 start before they ran into the Lightning on Saturday. If we're giving credit for early season five-win surprises, I'd prefer the Blues and maybe even the Flames. Who have the Capitals even beaten? (Actually looks at schedule.) OK, fine, but other than the Golden Knights, Stars and Devils, who have they even beaten? Let's see what they do with the Rangers tomorrow and then we can talk.

**4.** They're too low on the Devils — This is a bit of a weird one for me, because I feel like I've been more bearish on the Devils than most, and have pushed back on the idea that they should be automatically grouped with the elite Cup contenders. But having them ranked behind not just the Capitals but also the Leafs and Lightning and just one spot ahead of the Kings seems like an overreaction. Yes, they should probably figure out a way to get their supposedly improved goalie tandem to stop doing stuff like this, but they're still a top 10 team in my mind.

**3.** They have the Sharks ranked 32nd — Honestly, might be optimistic.

**2.** They had the 5-0-2 Wild ahead of the 7-0-0 Jets — Both fan bases have spent the last week being mad at me for not believing in them enough, and I think one case is stronger than the other for reasons I touched on here.

**In short:** The Jets finished last year with the same regular-season record as the eventual Stanley Cup champions, so it's possible we should be taking them much more seriously than most of us seem to be. Meanwhile, the Wild missed the playoffs, so aren't they more likely to be the fluke here? (Yes, they had injuries, which is both a significant factor in their disappointing year and one I think some of their fans are overstating.) If I was making my rankings based on a shorter-term view, I'd take the perfect team

over the one that had won five of seven, especially when one of those losses was in their only head-to-head meeting.

Does that mean the Jets are in my top five this week? We'll get to that in a bit, but I'd certainly have them ahead of Minnesota.

By the way, I wrote all of that before the Wild lost to the Flyers in regulation. Speaking of which ...

1. They didn't factor in anything at all that happened over the weekend — Just lazy if you ask me.

So yeah, the rivalry is on. I expect all my readers to swear loyalty oaths, get at least one "Monday Rankings 4 Life" tattoo and boycott all of Gentile's podcasts. Wait, that last one might be a bad idea. Crap, let's hope I put more thought into this week's rankings than I did into this fake rivalry thing ...

### Road to the Cup

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

Remember, fans of contending teams: It's never too early to decide your team's entire season rests on them acquiring a certain player on the trade market.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (6-2-1, +14 true goals differential\*) — With the Oilers still missing a gear, the Knights become one of two new teams to crack this week's list. They got Shea Theodore locked up, too.

4. Winnipeg Jets (8-0-0, +20) — Not much to say, except yes, of course the Jets have to crack the top five this week, as a team that was already a contender and has come into the season red-hot. If you missed it, be sure to check out Murat's sit-down with Scott Arniel.

3. Florida Panthers (6-3-1, even) — The completely unnecessary little cross-check is what really makes it:

2. New York Rangers (6-1-1, +18) — Everyone who listens to either of the podcasts knows this song by now, but I continue to not understand why potentially elite young players are signing seven- and eight-year extensions rather than betting on themselves. No, I wouldn't turn down \$52 million if I was Alexis Lafrenière. I wouldn't turn down a Happy Meal and a fistful of change, but I'm not an elite athlete just entering my prime. Tidy work by the Rangers who are winning on and off the ice these days.

1. Dallas Stars (7-2-0, +11) — We get a really nice early season showdown this week, with the Stars facing the Panthers in an old-school back-to-back in Tampere, Finland on Friday and Saturday.

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

**Not ranked:** Boston Bruins — Crisis averted, at least for now. Heading into the weekend with three straight losses and some ugly numbers up and down the roster, the Bruins felt like a team that desperately needed a win. Fortunately, playoff mode kicked in just in time as the Bruins found a way past the Maple Leafs.

It was a fittingly dramatic end to a week that saw the Bruins' issues bubble to the surface of the league's attention. In addition to mounting losses and worrying analytics, we had a mini-controversy over coach Jim Montgomery's outburst toward Brad Marchand. The captain calmed that situation down quickly, so all's well that ends well. The question is whether the Bruins' larger problems have actually ended, or whether beating a slumping Leafs team is just a temporary pause on the narrative.

This is still a team sitting at .500 and tied for third in their division, so it's not like we're into emergency territory here. But expectations in Boston are high, and the team hasn't delivered on them yet.

Marchand hadn't scored until Saturday. The newly signed Jeremy Swayman hasn't looked like the star he's now paid to be. David Pastrňák hasn't been great. Center remains a question mark, even with Elias

Lindholm. And nobody on the roster is having anything you'd call a breakout start other than maybe Cole Koepke.

Plenty of teams would love to switch problems with the Bruins, but that's not a short list of issues. For now, they've got the Flyers twice this week, so the chance to keep banking points is there. While you can't just ignore the warning signs, this still feels like a team that's earned some benefit of the doubt over the years. For now, let's say they're well out of the top five running, but hardly worth any sort of panic mode. (Unless they get swept by the Flyers, in which case fire everyone.)

### **The bottom five**

The five teams that are headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for James Hagens, or maybe someone else.

Are the Predators so back, as the kids would say? They responded to last week's callout with a 3-0-0 week, so maybe. But let's see how this week goes, as they've got the Lightning, Oilers and Avalanche up next. Run that table, and we might not even need to cancel any concerts for this bunch.

**5. Philadelphia Flyers (2-6-1, -14)** — This one came down to the Flyers and Habs, who were kind enough to face each other last night and make life easy on us. Here you go, Flyers fans, you can stop lobbying me for a spot now.

**4. Anaheim Ducks (3-4-1, -6)** — The real-world standings say they're not bad. Dom's projected standings say don't get used to it. But for now, it's been the Lukáš Dostál show, with the 24-year-old looking like he may not be ready to just hand the starting job back to John Gibson when the veteran returns.

**3. Columbus Blue Jackets (3-3-1, +3)** — They've alternated wins and losses all season long. If that pattern continues, that would mean a win over the Oilers tonight and the Jets on Friday. If that happens, it might be time to start writing those "These guys are better than we think" pieces.

**2. Chicago Blackhawks (2-6-1, -9)** — This was fun:

During the intermission Shoot the Puck contest on Friday night, Ron Jurinek scored both shots in memory of his son, Jake, a lifelong Blackhawks supporter. The Jacob Jurinek Foundation will donate \$100 for each home goal scored by the Blackhawks this season, turning every goal...

**1. San Jose Sharks (0-7-2, -20)** — Hey, remember when we made "Well at least they won't start the season with 11 straight losses again" jokes? They're up to nine, with games against Utah, Los Angeles, Chicago and Vancouver coming up this week, as that old familiar feeling sinks in. Maybe even worse, promising rookie Will Smith has not looked good.

**Not ranked: Pittsburgh Penguins** — The bad news is they're a mess. The worse news is I have zero idea how you even start to fix it. I'm not sure Kyle Dubas does either.

The Penguins entered the 2024-25 season with an apparent plan. They were old, expensive and not necessarily very good, but there was enough talent to hope enough would break right to get them back into the playoffs. Once they were there, some puck luck and hot goaltending arriving at just the right time to supplement the remaining veteran magic of Sidney Crosby and friends could add up to just enough to make things interesting.

I didn't say it was a good plan, but it was a plan. So far, it's not working.

The goaltending stinks, so much so that Tristan Jarry was sent down to the AHL over the weekend. It's technically a loan and not a demotion, with the whole thing framed as a conditioning assignment. The condition they're trying to address is that Jarry hasn't been able to stop a puck this year. Did we mention

the big contract? There's also the big contract. With nominal starter Alex Nedeljkovic looking so-so after a return from injury, the position is a major weakness right now.

There was a time when the Penguins could have outscored that problem. They're trying, and have scored six goals in all three wins this year. But that means they're 0-for-7 when they score fewer than six, which isn't a path to the playoffs. It's been Evgeni Malkin carrying the offense, which is very cool to see from a 38-year-old. But Crosby has just one goal, Erik Karlsson looks old and Kris Letang just seems washed. Old, slow and relying on Joel Blomqvist is no way to go through an NHL season, at least one that was supposed to feature a playoff chase.

Instead, they've lost five straight, they're blowing leads and columnists are using words like "disastrous."

**So what should Dubas do now?** As I said, I've got no idea. Trades are rare at this time of year, it's not like other teams are lining up for a piece of the Penguins roster and the picks and prospects cupboard is mostly barren. There aren't any difference-makers waiting in the AHL, and no big names ready to return from injury. This is just what they are.

That leads to questions about a coaching change, which is the one card always available to a GM without any other answers. Two things have been true in Pittsburgh for the last several years: Mike Sullivan always seems to be on the hot seat, and he also always seems to have just recently signed a multiyear extension that makes that speculation seem moot.

**So now what?** Maybe nothing, aside from continuing to play out the schedule and hoping things turn around. It could happen. Maybe Jarry can rediscover his game and/or Nedeljkovic can shake off the rust. Or maybe Crosby just decides he's not going to spend the last chapter of his career this way, and puts the team on his back for as long as he can. Maybe Dubas defies the conventional wisdom and finds a way to swing an actual hockey trade that gets the team back on track.

Or maybe the window well and truly slams shut, the Penguins are an afterthought and Crosby's final years are spent on a mushy-middle team that can't rebuild or contend. That seems to be where we're headed, but it's early. That might be the only good news to be found in Pittsburgh these days.

## The Athletic / A year after Adam Johnson's death, why are NHL players resistant to skate-cut protection?

By Mark Lazerus and Sean Gentile – October 29, 2024

The thought comes in flashes, sudden reminders. When a player gets checked into the bench and his legs dangle over the boards. When someone goes hard to the net, trips over a stick and goes soaring through the air, legs flapping behind him like coat tails. When there's a battle in the corner and guys are kicking at the puck in an effort to dislodge it.

Even when someone just hops over the boards for a shift change. It's always there, gnawing at Chicago Blackhawks center Jason Dickinson.

"Personally, it's never not been on my mind," Dickinson said. "Ever since I was in junior, I was always super paranoid about my arms being up on the boards and someone jumping over. It was always there in my head that those are blades. Those are sharp. I've been cut by much duller things."

Dickinson's been on both sides of skate cuts. He had a harrowing near-miss two seasons ago when he caught a skate to the collarbone in a game against the Vegas Golden Knights. And last season, he very nearly took out the eye of Boston Bruins center Jakub Lauko while falling into the boards. Both instances have stayed with him, serving only to deepen that nagging concern in the back of his mind.

Dickinson is a thoughtful and conscientious player. So if anyone in the NHL were going to embrace cut-resistant technology — around the neck, around the wrists, around the Achilles tendons — it'd obviously be Dickinson, right?

Wrong.

"I don't wear a shirt when I play — I get super hot," Dickinson said. "So wearing something on my wrist or my neck, I'm going to sweat even more than I already do. So am I at risk for cramping? So I understand. I tried wearing them and I just started overheating. I want to wear them. I wanted to wear them. But I also need to feel good. So if I'm on the bench and I'm getting light-headed or I'm cramping, now I'm also at risk for injury elsewhere. It's a tough thing."

One year ago this week, former Pittsburgh Penguins forward Adam Johnson died after an opponent's skate sliced his neck during a game in Britain's top hockey league. Amid the shattering grief within the global hockey community arose a discussion about the need to better protect hockey players from what essentially amounts to a three-millimeter-wide knife blade affixed to each player's foot. As the game gets faster and faster and the players get bigger and bigger, more and more players are losing control of their legs in high-speed collisions in front of the net, along the boards and at the benches. Edmonton Oilers forward Evander Kane had his wrist cut open by Pat Maroon's skate two years ago. Former Ottawa Senators defenseman Erik Karlsson had his Achilles tendon lacerated by Matt Cooke 11 years ago. Nearly every player has a story about a near-miss; they all just got lucky.

Hockey players see themselves as invincible, a foolhardy but necessary mindset in a fast and violent game. Johnson's death reminded everyone that they're not. The on-ice death of a peer was going to serve as a catalyst for change, for players to adapt. It had to.

**So one year later, what has changed at the NHL level?**

Hardly anything at all.

Neck protection is now mandatory at many of the lower levels, but in the NHL, most teams have one, maybe two, often no players wearing any. They cite comfort. They cite the awkward appearance. They cite their routines.

“I’m not necessarily surprised,” said Blackhawks winger and Johnson’s former Minnesota-Duluth teammate Joey Anderson, who was required to wear a neck guard after Johnson’s death because he was in the AHL at the time, and who continues to wear it in the NHL. “At this age, guys are pretty stubborn. They’re into their routines and set in their ways. It’s hard for guys to change.”

The option to be stubborn, though, is increasingly limited to players at the highest level.

Since Johnson’s death, USA Hockey has made neck protection mandatory for players competing in youth, girls, high school and junior hockey. The International Ice Hockey Federation has done the same for players in all its tournaments, rather than simply those featuring teenagers. All three Canadian major junior leagues now have mandates on the books; the Western Hockey League had been the holdout.

Perhaps most relevantly, the American Hockey League — the final pre-NHL step for many players and a league long used as a testing ground for rule and equipment changes — is now requiring neck protection for all its players and officials.

“Hopefully that’s what’s going to end up happening as we move forward here, that it’s just going to be a piece of their equipment,” AHL president and CEO Scott Howson told the Associated Press before his league started its season. “With the different products out there, hopefully all the players can find something that they can adapt to and eventually like — or, at the very least, not notice when they’re playing hockey.”

In other words, regardless of whether NHL players are on board, the market for neck protection has never been more robust.

The hope, according to those within the industry, is that increased demand leads to higher quality, more options and more palatable price points.

The comfort factor is crucial for widespread adoption by professionals, but it’s less of a pressing issue for beer leaguers, children and others who are competing in leagues with mandates already in place. For that captive audience, according to many manufacturers and stakeholders within the game, the question is a little more simple: How well does the cut-resistant equipment actually work?

“Mandating a piece of equipment which is potentially ineffective is not the answer. The answer is more complicated than just making a rule,” Dr. Mike Stuart told *The Athletic*. Stuart is the chief medical officer for USA Hockey, a member of the IIHF medical committee, the father of three former NHL players and a longtime champion of increased safety standards in the game.

“We have to make sure what we’re doing is going to be effective,” Stuart said. “And that means developing high-quality and affordable cut-resistant products.”

It’s not that the current standard is lacking, Stuart said. Hockey Canada has long required neck protection certified by Canada’s Bureau de normalisation du Quebec (BNQ), and the BNQ standard is the baseline for the Hockey Equipment Certification Council, a non-profit organization that USA Hockey relies on to certify safety gear such as helmets and visors. The HECC says its goal is to have certification for neck guards in place by 2025. Manufacturers can already apply to the program.

It’s a starting point, according the HECC — not the finish line.

“Let’s try for the best cut-resistant materials with the best anatomic coverage,” Stuart said. “But let’s also test it as best we can and make it hockey-specific.”

For finicky NHL players, comfort and maneuverability is just as important as efficacy when it comes to protective gear. Capitals winger T.J. Oshie's equipment company, Warroad, was already offering protective gear, and Johnson's death sparked a massive increase in interest. Warroad's most effective product in this area is the Tilo "neck and wrist top," a turtleneck of sorts that offers skate-cut protection around the neck and wrists. Oshie was involved in the design of the shirt, and his experience with standalone neck and wrist sleeves informed the process.

Oshie is American, but whenever his youth teams played in Canada, they were required to wear neck protection. The ones they used were thick, bulky pieces of foam that were hot and itchy and generally awful to wear.

"We'd just end up taping it into a little ball and it turned into a necklace," Oshie said. "It wasn't protecting anything."

Players competing during IIHF tournaments have done the same. "I have pictures from national teams where players would remove the cut-resistant material and wear a little piece of cloth around their neck to satisfy the requirement," Stuart said. "As a medical professional trying to prevent catastrophic injuries, that mandate is not effective."

Modern neck guards are made of thinner but stronger fabric, but they still fall out of place or bunch up, leaving much of the neck exposed. Same with the wrist sleeves. By including them as part of the shirt, Oshie said the protection stays in place where players need it. Unsurprisingly, it's not cheap — the Warroad website lists it at \$199 per shirt.

After Johnson's death, Warroad couldn't keep up with the initial flood of orders and requests, but Oshie immediately brought some of the shirts to the rink in Washington. A handful of Oshie's Capitals teammates tried the shirt. None of them stuck with it. They were surprised at how much more comfortable it was than the old bulky guards, but they still found it too warm, too noticeable, too different.

"The one thing I've seen in the last 17 years that I've been in the league is hockey players aren't very quick to change what they have," Oshie said. "Some of the greats in the league now are still using the same cup from when they were in juniors. There's definitely a superstition thing that goes along with hockey players. When they find something they like, they're sticking with it. Even if there's something better."

One of the first things Oshie did every summer when he was at the University of North Dakota back in the mid-2000s was take the infernal cage off his helmet. A clear view of the ice felt freeing, but it did leave him feeling a little exposed. So he tried a visor. Didn't take. It always fogged up, there was a glare and it affected his sight too much. So Oshie took off the visor and went old-school, free and easy.

"I was still a stubborn college kid. I was like, 'I don't need a visor,'" Oshie said. "Then I took a skate to my right eye and eyebrow. I was like, 'All right. Maybe I do need a visor.'"

He's worn one ever since. He learned to manage the fog. He got used to the glare. He can see the puck just fine. It was the same thing the first time he wore his own brand's shirt, with the built-in neck and wrist protection. After a few practices, it felt entirely normal, like any other article of clothing.

Oshie, who's sidelined long-term with a chronic back issue, wore the shirt for the duration of last season. But he was very much the exception. While his Warroad gear is in all 32 locker rooms, he said the Philadelphia Flyers' Travis Konecny is the only NHL player currently wearing the specific Tilo neck-and-wrist protection shirt.

Edmonton Oilers winger Jeff Skinner does wear neck protection, made by Bauer, but he didn't have some sort of epiphany like Oshie did in college. Johnson's death didn't cause a fundamental shift in the way he thought about the game and his own invincibility. Skinner was with the Buffalo Sabres last year, and shortly after Johnson's death, a stack of turtlenecks designed to protect the neck from skate cuts showed up in the locker room, as it did in a lot of locker rooms. Skinner tried it.

"For me, I don't know, it felt fine, so I just kept it," he said.

Skinner only wears the turtleneck during games, not practices. Deep down, he knows the inherent danger of his sport, but it's not something he thinks about all the time. After all, skate cuts are hardly the only potentially catastrophic injury on the ice. There are rising slap shots headed right for your face and elbows from hard-charging defensemen, and a torn ACL or broken leg can happen at any moment.

"If it happens right in front of you, then maybe it crosses your mind," he said of skates endangering players. "There's a lot of stuff going on. There's body parts flying everywhere, and the puck you've got to worry about."

Skinner commended the league and the manufacturers for making protective gear available, but he also doesn't blame players who don't want to wear them. Hockey players are notoriously finicky about the equipment they wear — skates must be tied just so and tape must be applied here, not there. Some players change skates constantly, some wear the same pair all season. Same with sticks and gloves. Some players wear lucky undershirts that have more holes than fabric after years of use. Some, like Dickinson, don't wear anything at all under their gear.

"Equipment's a personal thing," Skinner said.

Johnson's death hit Anderson harder than most, as the two had been friends and teammates. Wearing the protective collar was a no-brainer for Anderson. But you won't see him proselytizing around the locker room.

"Guys can see it," Anderson said. "I'm not an old guy, especially in this locker room. It's not really my place to push things on guys. If someone asked me, I'd encourage it. But it's not my place to step in. At the younger levels, they're enforcing it now. Guys (in the NHL) are just grandfathered into their ways."

And that's how the change is likely to happen — slowly, from the ground up. With so many of the lower leagues now requiring protective gear, younger players will grow accustomed to it and bring it with them once they graduate to the NHL. Dickinson guessed that in 10 years, 90 percent of the league will be wearing neck protection regardless of whether the NHL requires it. After all, helmets weren't mandatory in the NHL until 1979, but Craig MacTavish was still going lidless as late as 1997 because he was grandfathered in.

The rise of concussions didn't convince all players that helmets were worthwhile. Gruesome eye injuries from sticks and pucks didn't change hearts and minds overnight about visors. And Johnson's death, shattering as it was for the hockey world, did little to change NHL players' attitudes about protective neck gear.

"The story did end up fizzling out," Dickinson said. "Unfortunately, it's not a hot topic. But I think it should still be on guys' minds. There's real risk."

There's also real reason for optimism, even if it takes a generation to bear out. Stuart has witnessed it — and spurred it — firsthand. In 2002, while a co-director of the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center, he co-authored a study on facial protection in hockey. He presented that research to the AHL, and it helped prompt the league to make visors mandatory for the 2006-07 season. Seven years later, they were mandatory for new NHL players. He sees that as "a kind of prelude" to the cut protection dialogue.



“I’m very encouraged because I think the entire hockey family is becoming more accepting. They realize the importance. And we also certainly understand the comfort factor, the cost factor,” he said. “These are all things that we have to work together on to make it not only effective but comfortable and affordable. And I think that’s happening.”

## [The Athletic / How is Finland shaping up for 4 Nations? Catching up with GM Jere Lehtinen](#)

**By Pierre LeBrun – October 29, 2024**

Team Canada and Team USA will naturally gobble up the majority of the media attention here in North America heading into the 4 Nations Face-Off in February.

But what makes the event even more compelling is that Sweden or Finland could well win it all and nobody would bat an eye.

It's the kind of statement Finland would love to make as a launching pad toward the 2026 Winter Games in Italy.

The Finns have always been a tough out in international best-on-best hockey, and for these two events, they're going to assemble arguably the country's most talented lineup ever. General manager Jere Lehtinen also hopes to continue his country's tradition of having tight-knit rosters that come together quickly. Finland has had a high degree of player buy-in and role-acceptance in the past, and Lehtinen doesn't want that to change with a deeper NHL roster.

Lehtinen replaced Jari Kurri as Finland's GM in the summer of 2014. He's run the national team through IIHF world championships over the past decade as well as two Olympics, 2018 and 2022, but this is his first best-on-best event since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

"It's been a while," Lehtinen said.

He did go through the process of putting together a roster of the top Finnish players in late 2021 when the NHL was supposed to go to the Beijing Olympics but pulled out. So he's not starting from scratch.

"We were pretty far (down the road) as far as putting up our team and talking to the players about it," Lehtinen told The Athletic over the phone from Finland. "But now finally it's real. It's fun. We're pretty excited about it, and I know the players were pretty excited when the 4 Nations and (2026) Olympics announcement was made.

"It's really important for those players — not just our guys, but all countries. They've been waiting for this."

Like Sweden, Canada and the U.S., the 4 Nations will be very much part of Finland's 2026 Olympic process, Lehtinen said: a tuneup and certainly a roster evaluation.

"If you make the 4 Nations team, and how you play there, that's some direction for the Olympics — it's huge," Lehtinen said. "There's a lot of players eager to put in a good effort (at 4 Nations) and maybe come to the '26 Olympics."

Lehtinen named his first six players back in June, and it was a complete no-brainer list: Aleksander Barkov, Sebastian Aho, Mikko Rantanen, Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell and Juuse Saros.

When you take into account that Roope Hintz is also a slam dunk to make the team, it's hard not to look at Finland's roster and argue that Barkov, Aho and Hintz down the middle is the best the country has ever had in terms of NHL star power.

"You can say that," Lehtinen agreed. "So it's going to be pretty interesting to see how it's going to go. But it's great. Because there was a time when we didn't have a lot of top centers, and now we have a lot out there. That's good for all of Finnish hockey. Maybe help younger players become centers."

Just like a generation of star NHL Finnish goalies once inspired young Finnish athletes to become netminders.

That leaves quite a competition for the fourth center job. Anton Lundell, for one, is on the rise with the Cup champion Florida Panthers.

“We know how he’s playing this year and how he played last season,” Lehtinen said. “Especially in the playoffs, he was great.”

Jesper Kotkaniemi probably started the season on the outside looking in for the 4 Nations after struggling the past few seasons. But he’s off to a good start with the Carolina Hurricanes, centering the second line. That’s an elevated role for him and the timing couldn’t be better as he hopes to get noticed by Lehtinen.

“It’s been a little bit frustrating to see how his career has been going because we all know he’s a big guy and we don’t have too many players that size,” Lehtinen said of Kotkaniemi (6-foot-3, 206 pounds).

“Now he’s that player, compared to last season, he was up and down. It’s good to see how he’s doing now. He’s getting more ice time, and of course, confidence is a big part of that, too.”

Finland may end up playing some centers at wing, too, depending on how they decide to go. Veteran Mikael Granlund has played both center and wing for Finland over the years.

“You’ve got a guy like Erik Haula in New Jersey who has been around and played in some tough games,” Lehtinen said. “We’ve done it before where some centers play wing. It’s not a big deal.”

Assistant GM Jarmo Kekäläinen agrees this is as deep as Finland has ever been at center at this level.

“Absolutely,” Kekäläinen told The Athletic. “One good thing about centers is that they can always play the wing but not the other way around. You look at the Team Canadas that have had a lot of success, they had a lot of centers on the wing. That’ll work. But if you don’t have centers, then you’re in trouble. So I think that’s no secret it’s probably the biggest strength of our team.

“I think in building teams, that’s a huge part of being successful is being strong at center ice. So, we’ll take that as a very positive trend in Finnish hockey.”

At wing, it goes without saying that the preseason injury to Patrik Laine was horrible to see for everyone, including Finland’s management.

“I talked to him this summer and before training camp,” Lehtinen said. “It was tough, for him, what he went through last season. Tough personally, and health-wise he was getting healthy, but then that happened.

“So we’ll see what we have and where everyone is at and how everyone is playing when we decide (the roster Dec. 2).”

In theory, Finland could name an injured player and then replace him if he remains injured. Any of the four countries can do that. But my guess is Laine won’t be back until January at the earliest, so I don’t think it’s that likely for Finland to name him Dec. 2. Lehtinen wasn’t tipping his hand on that.

“You have to see the whole big picture, where everyone is at health-wise and how everyone is playing,” he said. “We have a month of games played before those decisions.

“It’s too early for me to say too much (on Laine).”

Laine’s injury was bad enough, but you can imagine Lehtinen’s reaction when Barkov went down the first week of the season. Luckily, it looked worse than it is.

“It’s good that it wasn’t that bad,” Lehtinen said. “Anything can happen, though.”

Lehtinen points to the eve of the Sochi Olympics a decade ago, when Finland lost Valtteri Filppula to an injury suffered in his last NHL game before the Olympic break. Brutal timing.

“That was devastating,” Lehtinen said. “I called him after the game. He said he was done. It was too bad. You don’t want to see that. You want all the teams to have all their players be there.

“But you’re right, when Barkov got hurt, it was one of those moments. Oooh. When we realized it wasn’t that bad, it was good news.”

Lehtinen will come over to North America to watch NHL games next month, but in the meantime, he has Kekäläinen scouting them. That’s been a big help.

“Unfortunately he’s not in Columbus anymore (as GM), but for us, he has more time to concentrate on our team,” Lehtinen said.

Added Kekäläinen: “I obviously want to keep up with the NHL, so this gives me a real good chance of doing that, watching games and traveling and going to games plus watching video. We have a group of guys we have to watch carefully to make some final selections. We don’t have the luxury of having as many (NHL) players as some of the other countries in this tournament, so we have to do an even better job of making sure we select the right guys.”

One thing both Lehtinen and Kekäläinen agree on is the need to pick a roster that comes together best as a team, which means making sure there are players who play certain roles.

“You have to have good chemistry and have the players in the right spots throughout the lineup,” Lehtinen said. “We all know if you only have skilled players ... you still have to have special teams players. Top players can play both, but you also want to have those players who really specialize (in) PK.”

So, for example, they’ve been watching Montreal games closely to see how Joel Armia is faring. He kills penalties for the Habs and has size, which appeals to Finland’s brain trust.

There’s no guarantee Armia is selected, but it’s an example of how it’s not just about picking the biggest names.

In goal, obviously Saros is the No. 1 and already picked. There’s a nice competition for the other two jobs between Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen in Buffalo, Justus Annunen in Colorado, Joonas Korpisalo in Boston and Kevin Lankinen in Vancouver.

“There’s good choices there,” Lehtinen said. “We’ll see how everyone is playing.”

All things being equal, regardless of who gets the No. 2 and No. 3 jobs in goal, Finland is riding Saros, and his ability alone is a reason Finland could win it all.

## ESPN / Who gets NHL's next big contract? Top candidates right now

By Kristen Shilton – October 29, 2024

Contract negotiations are a delicate thing. Some NHL players prefer tuning them out all together during the season. Others might want the process wrapped up quickly -- but fairly -- and listen in on every detail year round.

The key is not to let those conversations be a distraction to what is actually being achieved on the ice.

Just ask Alexis Lafreniere.

He's the latest player to sign a long-term extension, inking a seven-year, \$52.15 million pact with the New York Rangers last week on the heels of a breakout 2023-24 campaign in which the 23-year-old tallied 28 goals and 57 points in 82 games. If Lafreniere continues that sort of growth, his big deal will be a sweet steal for the Rangers.

Now that Lafreniere is locked in long term, who might be next to secure the proverbial bag?

There's already speculation around what the likes of Connor McDavid, Cale Makar and Kirill Kaprizov could receive on a fresh extension, which they're all eligible to sign beginning in July 2025.

After conversations with league insiders, here is a sample of players -- from the obvious to perhaps less so -- that are poised to (possibly) get paid sooner rather than later. And with the NHL salary cap expected to keep climbing upwards from its current \$88 million, there's (potentially) even more money to spare when those contracts are doled out.

### **The superstars**

It was a gasp heard 'round the hockey world when ESPN's Kevin Weekes reported earlier this month that Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin had turned down an eight-year, \$88 million extension that would have made Shesterkin the highest-paid goalie in NHL history.

Make no mistake: Shesterkin will be paid handsomely at some point -- in New York or somewhere else if the pending unrestricted free agent so chooses. And that deal will recalibrate the market for goaltenders going forward.

"My guess is Shesterkin will get upwards of \$11.5 [million] per," one agent said. "He's not going to settle for a lower number just because. I think the [Jeremy] Swayman situation proved that's no longer [a norm]."

Fair enough. Swayman played hardball with the Bruins and was rewarded with an eight-year, \$66 million contract just before the start of the regular season. Shesterkin has come a long way over the course of his current four-year, \$22.67 million deal. He won a Vezina Trophy as the league's top goaltender following the 2021-22 season, and finished third that year in Hart Trophy (league MVP) voting. He's perennially one of the NHL's top netminders, and this season is no different; Shesterkin has a .926 save percentage and 2.16 goals-against average, both of which are top five in the NHL.

Shesterkin's position as New York's backbone makes his next contract the massive move worth watching out for next. And who knows? There could be more drama on the way there before pen hits paper.

Speaking of drama, there has been no shortage of it surrounding Mitch Marner. The Toronto Maple Leafs winger has declined to comment publicly on extension talks, but they are happening behind closed doors. Marner's current mark of \$10.9 million per year seems likely to rise, and he has two teammates

as points of comparison in talks: Auston Matthews' \$13.5 million per year and William Nylander's \$11.5 million. Marner falls somewhere in the middle.

His camp has taken a "wait and see" approach with the Leafs thus far, testing the waters from training camp into the new season and watching how that played out. Marner has had a solid start to the campaign with one goal and 10 points in nine games, giving him the team lead in scoring. With that in mind, it would behoove the Leafs to get Marner's deal done now before the asking price starts to rise.

On the other hand, it's the postseason where Toronto has most wanted to see Marner at his best -- and where the winger has repeatedly faltered at being a certifiable difference-maker.

"It wouldn't surprise me at all if Marner gets to the summer without an extension," another agent said. "It also wouldn't shock me if Marner was the next guy signed [to a big contract]. He's a dominant player. But how does [GM Brad Treliving] see that team's core now and going forward? It all factors in."

One marquee player who might not be satisfied quickly (or easily) by his current club? Mikko Rantanen. The Colorado Avalanche's top-line winger appears to have stalled out in conversations with the Avs about extending beyond his current deal worth \$9.25 million per season. Rantanen has teammate Nathan MacKinnon's eight-year, \$100.8 million contract as a comparison tool, and that's not necessarily the range Colorado sees Rantanen landing in -- even if Rantanen does.

Expect Rantanen to use a hot 2024-25 campaign -- in which he's now tied for third in league scoring with four goals and 13 points -- to showcase why he's worth a MacKinnon-like payday when the time comes to close a deal, in Colorado or somewhere else.

### **The core set**

It's not like typically tight-lipped New York Islanders GM Lou Lamoriello is going to tip his hand about Brock Nelson's future with the team. But Nelson is a pending UFA and despite some rampant speculation the Islanders could move him at the trade deadline, there's a strong case to be made for paying the man to stay long term.

Nelson's career has been on the rise for most of the past three seasons, over which he has led New York with 111 goals and 209 points in 244 games (with three consecutive 30-plus-goal seasons). Frankly, the 33-year-old has been showing up for a roster that's consistently short on scoring, and the fact that he's getting better year over year makes extending him past this six-year, \$36 million contract smart business for Lamoriello. Foundational pieces like Nelson are hard to come by.

It's a similar situation with Vancouver forward Brock Boeser. Despite an up-and-down run with the Canucks to date that included last season's disappointing finish to the postseason due to a blood-clotting issue, there's no denying Boeser's position as a steady force in Vancouver's offense. The 27-year-old had the best regular season of his career in 2023-24, pacing the Canucks with 40 goals and 73 points in 81 games, then adding seven goals and 12 points in 12 postseason games before being sidelined. Those numbers -- coupled with a point-per-game start to this season -- should net Boeser a hefty increase on his current three-year, \$19.95 million deal.

It may take a while for the Canucks to sort through their cap situation and find a middle ground with Boeser. And given how well he's playing, Boeser might not mind waiting, either.

Another core player who seems like a no-brainer for a long-term deal is Florida Panthers center Sam Bennett. Talks are ongoing between the Panthers and their pending UFA, and that's a great thing for both parties. Florida already sealed a long-term deal with Carter Verhaeghe this month, and taking care of Bennett is GM Bill Zito's next priority.

Bennett has eclipsed the 40-point mark in each of his past three seasons with Florida and gathered 20-plus goals in two of them, making him one of the Panthers' most reliable forwards. He is one of the league's prominent power forwards -- an increasingly rare breed -- and Bennett also packed a punch for the Panthers in the playoffs, averaging nearly a point per game in both of their runs to the Stanley Cup Final in 2023 and 2024.

Bennett is wrapping up a contract worth \$4.425 million this season, and while he should expect a raise of some sort, the opportunity to keep winning in Florida might be all the juice Bennett needs to get a more team-friendly deal closed and keep the good times rolling.

### **The rising stars**

It's simpler, in some cases, to peg where established players (like those above) might land in terms of their next significant contract. For the ones still putting down roots in the league? Trickier!

Take Boston Bruins center Morgan Geekie. He had a standout season in 2023-24, with career-high totals in goals (17) and points (39) through 76 games. Geekie entered training camp this fall with elevated expectations and top-six potential. Boston's uncharacteristically slow start to the campaign has seemed to put the entire team -- including Geekie -- in a haze, and the 26-year-old has just one assist in his first eight games.

What does it all mean in the grand scheme for Boston's pending RFA? Plenty. The Bruins have seen Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci retire in recent years, and it's guys like Geekie who can replace them in the future. That's not to say Geekie will be overpaid immediately, but it's in Boston's best interest to give Geekie a solid deal that solidifies his place as a premier part of their future. Doing so before summer could be a boost for Geekie's confidence.

The Dallas Stars have a comparably important player in Wyatt Johnston, who's also set to be a restricted free agent -- and whom they would be wise to take care of in short order. Johnston has face-of-the-franchise potential after totaling 56 goals and 106 points over the past two seasons. Johnston is also just 21 years old; given that he has already become a cornerstone of the Stars' offense, that's going to cost them on a new deal.

Offering Johnston a long-term deal at around the same \$8-\$8.5 million a year salary that Dallas has doled out to teammates Roope Hintz and Miro Heiskanen should be enough to keep everyone happy. Johnston has been with Dallas on consecutive trips to the Western Conference finals, and the opportunity to stay on a winning team is hard to turn down.