



Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips
February 24, 2026

Columbus Blue Jackets News

- PAGE 2 Fox 8 / Fans celebrate US men’s hockey win, tribute to Gaudreau
- PAGE 3 NBC4 / Olympic hockey wins energize Columbus fans
- PAGE 4 Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets Not Looking at Pending UFAs
- PAGE 6 The Athletic / Blue Jackets’ Werenski won’t be the same after winning gold, says two-time winner Nash
- PAGE 9 The Athletic / Blue Jackets Monday Gathering: Teammates revel in Werenski’s gold, and a stirring Gaudreau tribute
- PAGE 15 The Athletic / How Team USA honored late Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau with Olympic gold medal win
- PAGE 17 The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski has played like Captain America
- PAGE 19 The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 'proud' of Zach Werenski's gold medal effort
- PAGE 21 The Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski's hustle nets gold for U.S. at Milano Cortina 2026
- PAGE 23 The Hockey Writers / 2 Keys for the Blue Jackets Coming Out of the Olympic Break
- PAGE 24 WSYX ABC6 / Rick Nash rooted for one player as U.S. beat Canada for first gold in 46 years

Cleveland Monsters / Prospect News

NHL News

- PAGE 26 The Athletic / Trump invites gold-winning U.S. men’s hockey team to State of the Union

Multimedia

- [WATCH](#) WSYX ABC6 / Team USA’s golden Olympic victory includes a heartfelt tribute to Johnny Gaudreau

Fox 8 / Fans celebrate US men's hockey win, tribute to Gaudreau

By Kiara Patterson – February 23, 2026

CLEVELAND, Ohio (WJW) — Team USA is golden once again.

For the first time since 1980, the U.S. Men's Hockey Team has won Olympic gold, defeating Canada during overtime at the 2026 Winter Olympics. Team USA defeated Canada 2–1 in a thrilling overtime finish in Milan on Sunday.

However, this victory was about more than a medal — players paid tribute to the late Johnny Gaudreau during an emotional on-ice celebration.

Zach Werenski from the Columbus Blue Jackets set up Jack Hughes for the game-winning goal. Afterwards, players brought out Johnny Gaudreau's number 13 jersey, which hung in the locker room during the whole tournament. It was a tribute to Gaudreau, the former Columbus Blue Jacket, who died alongside his brother after they were struck by a car while riding bicycles in 2024.

His widow, Meredith, and family watched as the team honored him — a moment that hit home for fans back in Columbus.

"Especially when they bring in the Johnny Gaudreau jersey out, I was, I mean, tears were streaming down my face. This is one of the most proud moments I've been to be an American in my life," said Jack Devita, a Columbus Blue Jackets fan.

"That's a Zach Werenski play. That play doesn't happen because of him. Again and he plays 50 feet from us here in Columbus. Unbelievable guy. Like again, he's great, I couldn't be prouder that he's an American," said Jake Dimantova, another Blue Jackets fan.

Werenski is the first Columbus Blue Jackets player to win Olympic gold with Team USA and the second Columbus Blue Jackets player to win overall.

NBC4 / Olympic hockey wins energize Columbus fans

By Eric Halperin – February 23, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio (WCMH) — Team USA’s gold medal wins for both the men’s and women’s hockey teams at the Olympics are still the talk of the town, and fans say what happened after the men’s game transcends the sport.

There were cheers across central Ohio. First on Thursday after the women’s win. Then on Sunday morning after the men’s game. Fans packed into bars and restaurants across the area, including Zeno’s in Harrison West.

“Everybody erupted, and it felt like an earthquake,” Zeno’s owner Mitchell Allen said.\

Zach Werenski, star defender on the Columbus Blue Jackets, had the assist on the gold medal-winning goal in overtime for Team USA against Canada.

Local youth hockey players, parents, coaches, and others watched the game together at one of the Chiller ice rinks.

“That goal doesn’t happen without Zach Werenski, really making that play, so Columbus should be very proud, and in that room, just the excitement, we just erupted, everybody was screaming,” USA Hockey Manager of Education and Player Development Heather Mannix said.

Almost immediately after the game, there were more powerful moments. Throughout the Olympics, Team USA had made it a point to honor and include the Gaudreau family. Blue Jacket Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew were on bicycles when they were hit and killed by an SUV in 2024. Johnny’s jersey was always with Team USA, and they skated around the ice with it on Sunday.

“There was something more there than just great goaltending and I think Matthew and Johnny had a piece of that,” Blue Jackets Hockey League Executive Director Dave Caruso said.

Upper Arlington warns about new parking rules at Bob Crane Community Center

Werenski and other teammates got two of Johnny and Meredith Gaudreau’s kids and brought them onto the ice for a picture with the team.

“For them to go out and go out of their way to have that moment with the kids for everything his wife has lost and everything it was, like I said, it was a beautiful, magical moment,” Allen said.

Those in the local hockey community said the support shown for the Gaudreaus shows how strong the hockey family is.

Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets Not Looking at Pending UFAs

By Deepanjan Mitra – February 23, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets were supposed to be sellers at the trade deadline. Three weeks ago, that seemed like a certainty. Then Rick Bowness replaced Dean Evason behind the bench, and everything changed. The Olympic break made the franchise change its game plan.

The Blue Jackets have won 10 of 11 games since Bowness took over, putting them within four points of the Boston Bruins for the final wild card spot with a game in hand. That remarkable turnaround has completely shifted the conversation around the organization as the trade deadline approaches.

General manager Don Waddell spoke to Jeff Svoboda of the Blue Jackets team website during the Olympic break and acknowledged how dramatically the situation has evolved.

"Well, three weeks ago, before I hired Bowness, I thought the way we were headed, we would be getting lots of assets at the deadline," Waddell said.

Everything Has Changed

Instead, Columbus has battled back into the playoff race. The team has five crucial games before the deadline, and Waddell plans to monitor how those play out before making any major decisions.

"We'll continue to monitor those and hopefully come out of this break on a good note and keep it going," he said. "Obviously, we're not going to go 11-1, but we want to keep ourselves in the race here."

Being in playoff contention instead of selling off assets creates different challenges for a general manager. Waddell admitted the stress level is higher now than it would have been as a seller.

"Does it make it harder? It makes it a lot more fun, that's for sure," Waddell said. "The stress level is probably a little higher than normal. I wear an Oura ring for a reason: to tell me my stress levels for the day."

But he'd rather deal with that stress than face the alternative.

"I'd rather be in this position than the way we were going because at least now we have some good decisions to make," he said.

Not Adding Rentals

While Waddell didn't fully reveal his deadline plans, he made one thing clear. The Blue Jackets won't be pursuing rental players to boost their playoff push.

"The one thing we probably won't do is go out and try to add UFAs at the deadline," Waddell explained. "You might go around the edges a little bit, but having in particular three forwards that play good roles on our team, to add another UFA and give up assets, probably doesn't make sense."

Columbus already has several pending UFAs playing important roles.

Boone Jenner, Charlie Coyle, Mason Marchment and Erik Gudbranson are all on expiring deals. Adding another rental player would require giving up assets while potentially losing their own UFAs in the summer.

"All the UFAs right now on our team play a good role for our team, so if you take anybody off, you're going to have to replace them because of the positions that they play," Waddell said.

What's Next

The exception would be acquiring a player with term remaining on his contract, which Waddell noted represents a different value proposition.

The Blue Jackets return from the break with a massive game against the Bruins, the team they're chasing for the final playoff spot. How Columbus performs over the next five games will determine whether they stay in the race or shift back to selling mode at the deadline.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Werenski won't be the same after winning gold, says two-time winner Nash

By Aaron Portzline – February 24, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — This month, former Columbus Blue Jackets star Rick Nash was asked by his son's first-grade teacher to help bring to life her lesson about this year's Olympics in Milan.

Nash dusted off his two gold medals, won as part of Team Canada in the 2010 and 2014 Olympics, and brought them to Columbus Academy so the students could pass them around the room, hang them around their necks, take pictures, etc.

"The teacher loved it," Nash told The Athletic. "The kids loved it. We had a blast."

Nash, who represented Canada at three different games, said he watched Sunday's showdown between Canada and the United States with as much excitement as all the other hockey fans across North America.

But Nash, the Blue Jackets' director of hockey operations, also realized what this experience could mean for Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, who not only won gold in his first Olympics but assisted on Jack Hughes' overtime goal in a 2-1 win.

Hughes is being celebrated all over the hockey world, and rightfully so. But Werenski's play to get him the puck in a perfect scoring position probably deserves more attention, especially how he muscled the puck away from Team Canada's Nathan MacKinnon before feeding Hughes.

"It was so cool to see him have a primary assist on the winning goal," Nash said. "I'm so happy for him and his family.

"I'm from Canada, of course, but my wife and my kids are all American, so we had a bit of a divided house in terms of who we were cheering for. I wanted Canada to do really well, obviously, but it was so fun to watch 'Z,' and truthfully I'm just so happy for him."

Nash said winning the gold medal changed him as a player, and it changed how others perceived him as a player. He expects the same to happen for Werenski, who has elevated his game in the last two seasons and is widely considered to be one of the top five blueliners in the league.

Werenski and Nash are the only two Blue Jackets players to have won Olympic golds.

"It definitely gives you confidence," Nash said. "You know that you were part of the best team in the world at a certain point in time, and that's a great feeling. These are the best players in the world, and you're in that group on top.

"The pace in the gold-medal game is at least as high as a Stanley Cup playoff game, maybe higher. It's not seven games, it's one game, so guys are not holding anything back. To win a game like that, yeah, it's something big you carry with you.

Nash never won the Stanley Cup. The closest he came was in 2014 when the New York Rangers lost in the Stanley Cup Final to the Los Angeles Kings. As such, his two gold medals — 2010 in Vancouver, B.C., and 2014 in Sochi, Russia — are the highlights of his career, he said.

Like Werenski, Nash never sought the spotlight, which is good. While Columbus ranks 15th in the United States by city population, it ranks 35th among TV markets, so it can be a challenge for players to gain attention across the great NHL and the sporting world.

But Nash believes that's about to change.

"Back when I played in Columbus, we didn't have many games televised, so it was hard for people to see our games outside of Ohio," Nash said. "I felt like when I home in the summer, it was definitely different after 2010 and 2014.

"With those gold medals, you definitely get recognized more. It exposes you on a world stage, and people who don't normally watch hockey suddenly know your name and know who you are. I've already had a few people from back home text me about Zach already."

It's the first time in 46 years — since the Miracle on Ice club of 1980 — that the United States won gold.

Werenski and Team USA flew from Milan to Miami on Monday, and Werenski is expected to travel to Washington, D.C., on Tuesday. After Sunday's win, President Donald Trump invited the players to his State of the Union address on Tuesday.

The celebration of Team USA is just getting started. But there are other ramifications of winning gold, too, especially at the grassroots.

Ed Gingher, president of the AAA Blue Jackets elite program, said rinks and leagues across central Ohio are bracing for an uptick in young players who want to play hockey. The city's "Learn to Play" program, run by former Blue Jackets center Andrew Cassels, is preparing for major growth.

"The Olympics are always a boost to hockey, curling, figure skating, etc.," Gingher said. "But you've got Team USA winning it and Werenski playing so well, representing the Blue Jackets and Columbus so well ... there's a ton of excitement.

"Just like there were kids a generation ago who wanted to be Rick Nash, there's a whole generation now that wants to be Zach Werenski. That's exciting for everybody."

The AAA Blue Jackets program has already developed seven NHL players and more than 30 pro players through the years.

The only concern, he said, is if there will be enough available ice to handle the enthusiasm. The AAA Blue Jackets are currently fundraising for a complex in Delaware County that could alleviate some of that.

"The Olympics were some of the big events of my childhood," Nash said. "Mind you, I grew up in a hockey-crazed community, but those were the things that made it even more crazy.

“It’s going to give the minor hockey community in Columbus a boost, for sure.”

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Monday Gathering: Teammates revel in Werenski's gold, and a stirring Gaudreau tribute

By Aaron Portzline – February 23, 2026

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

Item No. 1: Golden moment

Blue Jackets players and coaches began arriving in Nationwide Arena before 8 a.m. on Sunday, gathering well before practice to watch the United States and Canada play for the Olympic gold medal in Milan.

More than half of the Columbus roster hails from Canada, but even they had reasons to be conflicted.

The Blue Jackets' best player and emotional leader, defenseman Zach Werenski, has become a fixture with Team USA, and there is great pride among his teammates that Werenski gets to showcase his talent on an international stage.

Secondly, Johnny Gaudreau's memory — not to mention his No. 13 sweater — continues to be ever-present with Team USA, just as it has with the Blue Jackets ever since the tragedy that took the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau in August 2024.

On both counts, Sunday's game had a magical finish.

Werenski had the "golden assist" on Jack Hughes' "golden goal" at 1:41 of overtime, giving Team USA a 2-1 victory and their first Olympic goal in men's hockey since the Miracle on Ice team in 1980.

It was a magnificent goal, too, with Werenski tracking down the puck, outmaneuvering Canada's Nathan MacKinnon for the puck in the offensive zone, and turning and firing to Hughes coming through the left circle.

It will be an iconic moment in hockey history, and Werenski was right in the middle of it, the driving force of it.

"It was kind of a win-win as a Canadian," said Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson, a Canadian. "If the Canadians win, you're happy, or you're tremendously proud of your teammate, who is living out a dream that we all had as kids.

"I couldn't be more proud of Z and how he represented his country, how he represented the Blue Jackets over there. He did a tremendous job."

Werenski has made plays like that hundreds of times for the Blue Jackets, but this was the sporting world's biggest stage.

And in the roar and chaos of the postgame celebration, Werenski never stopped thinking about Gaudreau, a native of New Jersey, who played extensively with Team USA through the years and would have certainly made this roster.

Just seconds after Hughes' goal ended it, Auston Matthews, Matthew Tkachuk and Werenski took a lap around Milano Santagiulia's ice with a U.S. flag and Gaudreau's jersey, prompting tears from Gaudreau's parents, who were in the crowd, and his wife, Meredith, who sat beside them.

A few moments later, Werenski had an even more powerful assist. Before the Team USA picture, Werenski went into the crowd along with Dylan Larkin, to carry two of Gaudreau's kids — daughter, Noa, and son, Johnny Jr. — out onto the ice to pose with the club.

Werenski had one goal, five assists and a plus-8 rating in six games during the Olympics. The goal he scored in overtime came on his first shift of the extra period.

He's only the second Blue Jackets player to win a gold medal, joining Rick Nash, who won with Canada in 2010.

"He's one of our own," said Blue Jackets center Charlie Coyle, a Boston native. "We all know what he brings, but to add (an Olympic gold) to your resume ... you want to be around those guys, you want to be a part of it with guys who have done it on the biggest stages. Zach can say that now."

Team USA players were scheduled to fly to New York on Monday, but their plans changed due to winter weather expected along the East Coast. Instead, they'll fly to Miami before making their way back to their respective NHL clubs.

Werenski will then have approximately 48 hours to bask in the glow of Olympic gold before getting back to work in the NHL, where the Blue Jackets are in the midst of a battle for a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

President Donald Trump called the team after the game and invited them to Washington, D.C., on Tuesday for his State of the Union address, but it's unclear if that will work logistically.

The best guess is that Werenski will take a light skate with the Blue Jackets on Wednesday before they fly to Boston to start the stretch drive of the season on Thursday. But it's possible he might not skate again until the game in TD Garden.

What a strange world he'll be in for a couple of days: On Sunday, he was hugging and high-fiving Team USA teammate Charlie McAvoy. On Thursday, those two will go toe-to-toe when the Jackets face the Boston Bruins.

But there are still a couple of days to celebrate.

"I'm proud of Z; he deserves it," said Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, who played for Latvia until they were bounced late last week. "He did amazing in the Olympics. I'm super happy for him. I can't wait for him to come home and give him a hug."

Item No. 2: Slow dealin'

It doesn't appear that any of the Blue Jackets' four unrestricted free agents — Boone Jenner, Mason Marchment, Coyle and Gudbranson — will have new contracts in place by the time play resumes.

Whether they'll have new deals by the March 6 trade deadline is looking murky, too.

GM Don Waddell said he spent time during the break getting a feel from the players and their agents about what their next contracts would look like, especially the term of the deals. He also wanted to know if they wanted to stay in Columbus.

But, as of Saturday, Waddell said he has not extended an offer to any of the four players.

"It's a fine line," Waddell said. "If you get into negotiations and it doesn't go well, it could upset that player. Right now, we have a good thing going. I have a good feeling about what guys are thinking term-wise.

"I don't feel any urgency to get it done by March 6. We're in a different position than we were before our (last stretch of games), right? In early January, you'd said that if we're not going to make it, and I'm not able to sign them, I should trade 'em. But it's different now."

The Blue Jackets, by winning 11 of their last 12 games, including a seven-game win streak heading into the Olympic break, have pulled to within four points of Boston for the second wild-card spot and of the New York Islanders for third place in the Metro.

There's another reason to wait. The Blue Jackets play five games between Thursday and the March 6 trade deadline. It's been a hard, long climb to get back within sniffing distance of the postseason.

But all it takes is a small losing skid to tumble back down the standings again.

"That certainly plays a part in it," Waddell said. "I can't imagine we would go 0-5, but if we do, that might change our thinking a little bit, too."

It's possible that Coyle, a two-way center and one of the NHL's more respected leaders, will be a highly pursued player at the deadline. Marchment, who has reclaimed his scoring touch since joining the Blue Jackets in a December trade, could fetch a strong return, too.

But Waddell is willing to carry them past March 6 without deals in place, he said, unless he's blown away by an offer, or unless the Blue Jackets stumble out of the gate.

"There's a good chance none of them will be signed (by March 6)," he said. But that doesn't mean they'll be moved, either.

"I don't think I'd be too popular if I did that."

There's an outside chance that Waddell, in addition to keeping the UFAs, will be a buyer at the deadline. But he's only adding a significant piece, he said, if the player he's acquiring has term beyond July 1.

More likely is that he adds veteran players who can provide leadership and depth. If the Blue Jackets make the playoffs, you can't have too much of either.

Item No. 3: Take 5, Mason Marchment

“Take 5” is our brief and (mostly) non-hockey conversation with a Blue Jackets player, coach, broadcaster or staffer. This week, much-traveled left winger Mason Marchment:

From childhood to career, you’ve played and lived all over North America. Do you meet people easier from moving so much?

I think so, yeah. I lived in Tampa and then Edmonton and then San Jose for most of my childhood (his father Bryan Marchment played in the NHL). Then we went to Colorado for a little bit and then Toronto. I was bouncing around a lot as a kid, and it helps coming into a new dressing room, yeah. Being the new kid in class is always tough.

Have you found a favorite restaurant in town?

Martini’s, right? I always used to go there when Columbus was part of a road trip. That’s a spot where I definitely take my wife now, so that’s new. The Barn out in New Albany is one of our spots, too.

Parking ... do you go nose-in or do you back in?

Really? Um ... If I can pull through two spots so I’m heading out of the spot, I’ll do that. But I’d like to back it in normally. It’s easier to get out, right? Once you’re done shopping or eating, you kind of want to be ready to go. Get outta there.

Perfect sandwich...

Really? Um ... cheddar bun, toasted. Shredded chicken, tomato, lettuce and cheddar cheese. And if you have an avocado, throw some of that on there, too.

Anything surprise you about Columbus? You’ve only been here two months.

The thing I love is the small-town vibe. I’m from a small town, just like 45 minutes outside Toronto. So, you know, it kind of feels like home. It doesn’t take too long to get anywhere. I mean, it’s a pretty big city, but it doesn’t feel that way. And that’s good. We’re renting in New Albany. Good spot.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- Werenski’s adjustment back to the real world will probably have more to do with his mind than his legs or lungs. While he routinely plays 25-plus minutes in the NHL, he averaged only 16:23 during the Olympics and played only 12:10 in the gold-medal game. A big reason for that was the presence of defenseman Quinn Hughes, who missed last season’s 4 Nations Face-Off with an injury, but who assumed No. 1 duties at the Olympics. Werenski’s combined numbers from the 4 Nations and the Olympics: 10 games, 1-11-12, with a plus-11 rating.
- When the Blue Jackets resume play on Thursday in Boston, they’ll start with an active shutout streak of 146 minutes, 25 seconds. You may have forgotten, but the Blue Jackets headed into the break with two consecutive shutouts, one by Merzlikins (24 saves at New Jersey on Feb. 3) and one by Jet Greaves (21 saves on Feb. 4 vs. Chicago). The last goal they allowed was at 13:35 of the second period at St. Louis

on Jan. 31. It is the seventh-longest team shutout streak in franchise history. The longest was 199:28 during the 2008-09 season.

- Maybe that should say if the Blue Jackets resume play on Thursday. Boston and the rest of the East Coast are getting hammered by blizzard-like storms, and hundreds of flights over the next few days have already been postponed or canceled. The Blue Jackets, with 17 games scheduled for March, including only two-day span without a game, don't have an obvious spot to reschedule a game between now at the end of the season. Stay tuned.

- Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness is trying to get the Blue Jackets physically and mentally prepared for the pace of play and the grind of the schedule that's ahead of them. Sunday's practice was the second straight day they skated hard. After an off day on Monday, they'll return with another tough session on Tuesday, then taper down with a lighter skate on Wednesday.

- The Blue Jackets granted permission during the break for assistant coach Scott Ford to interview for the opening at Brown University, his alma mater. Late Saturday, Mark Divver of the New England Hockey Journal reported that Tommy Upton, an assistant at the University of Massachusetts, is expected to get the job.

- A few players went to the Caribbean or Florida for a blast of sunshine during the break. A few stayed home to simply rest up for the final seven weeks of the season. Kent Johnson? He and his fiancée, Yasmeene, were married on Feb. 9 in Sarasota, Fla., a private affair for just family and close friends. "We were thinking about a bigger wedding in the summer, but we changed plans and decided on a smaller one," Johnson said. "We got engaged before the season (in British Columbia), right before I left for Columbus."

- The Blue Jackets have had travel issues throughout this season, with spotty and inconsistent service — delays, cancelations, unplanned overnights on the road, etc. — from the charter company they're relied on the past two seasons. It's pushed them to the point, Waddell said, where club majority owner John P. McConnell is in the market for a Boeing 757 or Airbus 321 — or a similarly sized aircraft — that would give the Jackets their own plane, along with a regular flight crew and attendants. It likely won't come together until next season. These things take time. It's a major investment, obviously, Waddell said. "But it takes all of the issues we've had this year out of play."

- Michigan State center Cayden Lindstrom, the Blue Jackets' No. 4 draft pick in 2024, is listed among the NCAA leaders, but not in the category you might expect. Lindstrom, playing as a freshman after missing most of last season following back surgery, has had a frustrating season with just 1-7-8 in 25 games. He hasn't scored since Oct. 17. His 90 penalty minutes, though, are second-most in the NCAA behind only Gustav Stjernberg (94) of Bowling Green.

"I see (Lindstrom's) game coming together, but what we're not seeing are the results," Waddell said. "He's set up the winning goal on Thursday night (vs. Notre Dame), and it was a really nice play. But I think him and probably a lot of people expected him to have more (points) than he has right now."

It certainly increases the chances that Lindstrom spends another season playing college hockey. Waddell said he wasn't expecting Lindstrom to be one-and-done in the college ranks before turning pro, especially after missing so much time with the back injury. "I feel like next year will be a big year for him," Waddell said. "Not just with points, but development-wise."

- Meanwhile, Penn State defenseman Jackson Smith, the Blue Jackets' No. 14 pick last June, has been on a tear for the Nittany Lions. He has 9-7-16 in his last 15 games, including 1-4-5 in a weekend sweep of Ohio State. Waddell on Smith: "He's close to being as great as skater as Zach Werenski."

The Athletic / How Team USA honored late Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau with Olympic gold medal win

By Michael Russo – February 22, 2026

MILAN – In the hours leading up to Sunday’s gold medal game, Columbus Blue Jackets captain Zach Werenski and Detroit Red Wings captain Dylan Larkin came up with the idea.

If the United States won gold, they wanted a team picture with the late Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau’s family on the ice.

“We wanted to get the whole family on, but it was kind of hard with the gate, so we figured we’d grab the kids,” Werenski, Johnny’s former Blue Jackets teammate, said. “But it was a special moment seeing (their parents) Guy and Jane.”

So after Werenski, Team USA captain Auston Matthews and Matthew Tkachuk paraded Gaudreau’s Team USA jersey around the ice after winning their country’s first men’s hockey gold medal in 46 years, Werenski and Larkin found Johnny and Meredith Gaudreau’s 3-year-old daughter Noa and son Johnny Jr., who turned 2 on Sunday.

“I honestly felt (Johnny’s presence) the whole tournament. Felt he was here,” Werenski said. “I felt that feeling a lot in Columbus, and I felt it at the world stage, World Championships last year, now here at the Olympics. I feel like that he’s following us, and he’s got our back.

“This is something John would have been at. And to see his family here supporting us and seeing his kids, bringing them on the ice, we talked about playing for him, making him proud and I think we did that.”

The beloved “Johnny Hockey” and his brother, Matthew Gaudreau, died after being struck by an alleged drunk driver while riding their bicycles home after their sister’s rehearsal dinner in August 2024.

“Johnny and Matty should be here, and that is still the biggest loss that all of us, USA Hockey, their family, our family, has gone through, and to have Johnny Jr. and Noa out there, it just felt right,” Larkin said. “Johnny’s family first.”

The United States beat Canada 2-1 in overtime Sunday despite being outshot dramatically. Connor Hellebuyck was valiant in net, and Canada had missed chance after missed chance, including when Nathan MacKinnon blew a wide-open cage in the waning minutes.

“I think part of the puck not going in our net was somehow (Johnny) standing there doing something, laughing with Matty, just somehow they put a spell around our net where that puck didn’t go in,” Larkin said before smiling wide. “And, ironic, because it’s on the defensive side, he would never have been back there. But we miss him, and we love him. We love his family and we can’t wait to celebrate with them.”

United States defenseman Brock Faber's eyes welled up seeing the scene on the ice with Gaudreau's two kids sitting on Larkin's and Werenski's laps during the team photo.

"Just shows the lasting impact he'll forever have on this team," Faber said. "His jersey will always be hung up in this locker room, and just really puts things into perspective when you see those kids on the ice and his family in the stands. His legacy will live on, and even though he is not here, he's a part of this team, a huge part of this team."

"I think he's had a big impact on a lot of guys in our room," Matthews said. "A lot of guys grew up with him. Played with him. Spent a lot of time with him. Whether that's the NHL or World Championships, different setting like that. We've had his jersey in our room last year in the 4 Nations. Had his jersey in the room here at the Olympics. Just a subtle reminder that him and his brother are with us in spirit. To be able to get it done like that, to win, to have his jersey out there in the team photo, have his kids come out and be with us. we're obviously thinking of him. Just felt like the impact that he's had on so many guys in this room is special.

"He was with us in spirit the whole tournament."

The Athletic / 2 Keys for the Blue Jackets Coming Out of the Olympic Break

By Wesley Minke – February 23, 2026

Zach Werenski returns to the Columbus Blue Jackets after Team USA won the gold medal at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy. The focus now shifts to their push for a playoff spot, which is well within reach.

They entered the Olympic break as the hottest team in the NHL, winning 11 of their last 12 games under new head coach Rick Bowness. However, the last game of that stretch came just over three weeks ago, so how can Columbus regain that momentum down the stretch?

It starts with their red-hot star and Olympic gold medalist. Werenski has to come out of the break playing as well, or better, than he was during their seven-game win streak leading up to the Olympics. Werenski went into the break with points in 22 of his last 24 games, including 10 multi-point efforts in that stretch.

He only averaged a little over 17 minutes of ice time per game during the Olympics, which is significantly lower than the 26:22 he's averaged with the Blue Jackets this season. So, at least he wasn't overworked.

Blue Jackets Must Keep Up Scoring Pace

The Blue Jackets have been scoring a lot, with 46 goals scored in 12 games, averaging 3.83 goals per game. They've allowed 26 goals in those games for a 2.16 goals-against average. Maintaining those numbers will help them keep winning.

Werenski has been the star of the show, and while he hasn't found the back of the net a bunch, he has assisted on most of the team's goals. He continued that trend into the Olympics, where he scored one goal and five assists through six games, including the primary assist on the golden goal in overtime against Team Canada.

Feb 22, 2026; Milan, Italy; Zach Werenski of the United States celebrates after winning the men's ice hockey gold medal game during the Milano Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena. Mandatory Credit: James Lang-Imagn Images

However, Kirill Marchenko, Adam Fantilli, Mason Marchment, and a few others, who saw their point production slow down before the break, got to enjoy a much-needed few weeks off to recover and rest for a playoff push. The Blue Jackets' top line will be relied on heavily down the stretch.

The team's depth scoring has been a big part of the team's success, and the biggest contributor has been Charlie Coyle. Coyle has been all over the ice, and he's been a great leader and teammate this season. His play at both ends of the ice has kept the team in contention, and according to The Hockey Writers' Mark Scheig, has brought him into the Selke Trophy conversation as well.

Blue Jackets' Goaltenders Have to Stay Red Hot

Goaltending has been a huge part of the team's recent success. The Blue Jackets ended games before the break with back-to-back shutout wins, and they have three shutouts in this 12-game stretch. Jet Greaves earned two of them, while Team Latvia goaltender Elvis Merzlikins earned the other. Merzlikins, the only other Blue Jacket who was in Milan for the Olympics, started Latvia's first game of the tournament against Team USA and a loss to Team Sweden in the elimination round. Team USA's talent was too much to handle, and he was pulled after the second period.

Merzlikins and Greaves should both be well rested. The team will need them to continue playing lights out, especially with two games against teams directly ahead of them in the standings, the Boston Bruins and the New York Islanders, beginning on Thursday.

If the Blue Jackets can continue to score and their goaltenders can continue to lock down the crease, they should be able to collect huge points to close out the month of February and gain some momentum heading into the March 6 trade deadline.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski has played like Captain America

By Brian Hedger – February 23, 2026

Now that Zach Werenski is headed back from Italy with a Milano Cortina 2026 gold medal, it's time to review everything the Blue Jackets star has done for USA Hockey.

With apologies to United States captain Auston Matthews, the term "Captain America" now applies to Werenski, whose point-per-game Olympic effort was capped by a hustle play in 3-on-3 overtime that led to the winning goal in a thrilling 2-1 victory over Canada on Feb. 22.

It was the first Olympic gold medal for Team USA in men's hockey in 46 years, spanning back to the 1980 "Miracle-on-Ice" team that featured college stars who shocked the world.

What happened in Milan, Italy, wasn't a miracle. It was the capstone for something USA Hockey has steadily built in the sport with its U.S. National Team Development Program, which produced Werenski and most of his U.S. teammates, who are all NHL stars.

Werenski, who is in the prime of his NHL career, is putting together an even stronger bid to win the Norris Trophy as the league's top defenseman than he did last year as runner-up. He's also coming back from the Olympics a champion despite being used a low amount by a coaching staff that feared skating Werenski with Quinn Hughes, two elite offensive-minded defensemen.

Perhaps the gold medal game wouldn't have been as lopsided for Canada in shots and possession had the U.S. not held Werenski to just 11:40 through regulation in a 1-1 game, but the Blue Jackets' top player came up huge in OT, making his ice time and usage an afterthought.

Going into the game as the third defenseman over the boards in OT, following Hughes and Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy, Werenski teamed up with Hughes' younger brother, Jack, for the winning goal.

After his backhand flip landed short of Hughes inside the U.S. blue line, Werenski bolted out of the zone after Hughes tapped the puck past charging Canadian defenseman Cale Makar, a Colorado Avalanche star who got the Norris Trophy last season ahead of Werenski.

Chasing after it, Werenski's long reach and wingspan allowed him to get his blade on the puck to prevent another Avalanche superstar, Nathan MacKinnon, from scooping it up. Bumping MacKinnon out of the way, Werenski wheeled, spotted Hughes and calmly sent a pass that slid under the stick of Edmonton Oilers superstar Connor McDavid.

"He doesn't force it all the time," Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness said. "He has that unique ability to do that, and a lot of guys, when things aren't going good, they keep forcing it. He just has that unique ability to slow it down, bring it back and make the right play, which he did a few times (against Canada). I knew he was a really good player. I didn't know he was this good."

That's something Blue Jackets coaches and players have all said, almost verbatim, after joining the team and getting a front-row seat to watch Werenski. He's cool, calculating, calm and almost completely overlooked because of those traits.

"With the guys (Canada) had out there (in OT), that's no easy feat," said Blue Jackets center Charlie Coyle, who is from Boston. "To make that play, and to do that in the biggest moment and biggest stage is pretty special. He's got it all, and he showed it on that specific play. It was awesome to see."

That's becoming the norm for Werenski, who has worn the U.S. uniform during international competition four times in the past two years at two world championships, the NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off and the 2026 Winter Olympics. His medal haul includes a silver at 4 Nations, following a stinging OT loss to Canada, a gold at the 2025 world championships to end a 92-year drought for the U.S., and now an Olympic gold.

Werenski has played for the U.S. in 45 games since first putting on the red, white and blue as an alternate captain in 2013-14 at the Under-17 world championships. His career scoring line for USA Hockey is seven goals, 30 assists and 37 points with a +39 rating, including 2-16-18 with a +20 in the past year while playing at the 4 Nations tournament, worlds and Olympics.

Werenski, who joined the world championships in progress, is the only U.S. skater to play in all three of those tournaments and led all U.S. skaters in combined scored at 4 Nations and the Olympics with 1-12-13 in 10 games.

He's Captain America, and there's no question who should pick up the tab if the U.S. Olympic general manager, Bill Guerin (Minnesota Wild), ever joins Werenski for a dinner the star defenseman has promised.

The bill should be all Bill's now.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 'proud' of Zach Werenski's gold medal effort

By Brian Hedger – February 22, 2026

As the United States and Canada started their first shift of overtime at Milano Santagiulia Arena in Milan, Italy, the Blue Jackets prepared for practice at the Ice Haus.

All eyes in Columbus were glued on TVs showing the rivals locking horns for a gold medal in the men's hockey tournament Feb. 22 at the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics. Blue Jackets players watched Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy take the ice for the 3-on-3 showdown in OT ahead of his U.S. teammate and Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski. They all wondered the same thing.

"I mean, we're certainly biased towards him. but everybody in the locker room ... Canadians, Americans, Russians, Swedish, it didn't matter," Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "We're all like, 'Where is Z? Why isn't he on the ice yet?'"

Shortly after Werenski finally jumped over the boards, the NHL's leader in goals by defensemen made an elite play off a Canadian turnover that resulted in a golden goal scored by New Jersey Devils forward Jack Hughes, which gave the U.S. its first Winter Olympics championship since the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" team.

Chasing the puck, Werenski used his long wingspan to corral it before walling off Colorado Avalanche center Nathan MacKinnon to wheel and hit Hughes with a perfect pass. MacKinnon, for context, is an elite forward who's arguably one of the top two or three centers in the world.

Werenski, despite playing just 12:10 on 15 shifts, showed that he's also elite.

"Sure enough, he makes that play, and he's in on their golden goal," Gudbranson said. "He's a tremendous teammate and we're very proud of how he represented us."

Gudbranson is one of the Blue Jackets' many Canadian players.

He was pulling hard for Canada but couldn't help but feel good for Werenski, who paraded Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 U.S. jersey around the ice as a postgame tribute and held Gaudreau's oldest of three kids, daughter Noa, for a team photo.

Gaudreau, who likely would've been on Team USA, was killed along with his brother, Matthew on Aug. 29, 2024, when an alleged drunk driver struck them as they biked in Oldmans Township, New Jersey. Gudbranson and Sean Monahan, two Canadians who first befriended Gaudreau as teammates with the Calgary Flames, were happy to see the U.S. memorialize him while celebrating with the Gaudreau family.

"Very classy by USA Hockey to bring them over there," Gudbranson said. "It goes to show, again, how important Johnny was to the game of hockey, to us, to the Calgary Flames and to people all over the

world. He would've been on that team, too, and I would've been losing my marbles watching him skate around with the puck."

Charlie Coyle and the smaller U.S. contingent in the Blue Jackets' locker room spilled their own marbles when Hughes ended it, especially knowing it was Werenski's play that set it up.

"I was saying before overtime started that I really wanted 'Z' to score just to see who his real friends are in the locker room, to see if there were any cheers from Canadians," Coyle said, smiling. "Of course, he had a factor in it and made a great play to win a battle and get it over to Hughes. So, I don't think guys can be too upset by that. Most of our guys were pretty happy, but it was just an awesome game to watch."

Elvis Merzlikins, who played in the tournament for Latvia, enjoyed it too. He wasn't required to return until Feb. 24 but joined the Blue Jackets to watch the U.S. and Canada before getting on the ice for practice.

He made no secret about his rooting interests.

"I was super happy," Merzlikins said. "There were many Canadians here on the team, so I was against them. They didn't like it, but I was cheering for my teammate. That's what I told them. I'm proud. I'm proud of him. He deserves it and I can't wait for him to come home."

That's a shared sentiment, even among those who allegiance lies North of the border.

"It was kind of a win-win for us, as Canadians," Gudbranson said. "You're either winning and you're happy, or you're incredibly proud of your teammate who's living a dream that we all had as kids. I couldn't be more proud of 'Z' representing his country and how he represented the Blue Jackets."

The Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski's hustle nets gold for U.S. at Milano Cortina 2026

By Brian Hedger – February 22, 2026

Zach Werenski didn't get a lot of ice time, but the Blue Jackets star came up huge in overtime at Milano Santagiulia Arena in Milan, Italy, to help the United States end a 46-year drought at the Winter Olympics in men's hockey.

Werenski's hustle in 3-on-3 overtime on Feb. 22 created an opportunity for a perfect pass to set up Jack Hughes' golden overtime goal to defeat Canada, 2-1, to finish on top at Milano Cortina 2026, giving the Blue Jackets' top defenseman the primary assist.

Hustling down the ice to rip the puck away from Canadian forward Nathan MacKinnon (Colorado Avalanche captain), Werenski wheeled to find Hughes with a perfect feed for a shot that beat Canadian goalie Jordan Binnington under the pads 1:41 into OT, which is played in a 3-on-3 format.

It was the first Olympic gold medal for the U.S. since the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" team that upset the former Soviet Union to reach the gold medal game and the first time the U.S. has won at the Olympics since the NHL first sent players to Nagano, Japan, in 1998. Matt Boldy scored for the U.S. in regulation, while Cale Makar scored for Canada. Otherwise, the stars were the goalies, Connor Hellebuyck (41 saves) for the U.S. and Binnington (26 saves) for Canada.

Minnesota Wild forward Matt Boldy struck first for the U.S., bursting through Canada's top two defensemen, Cale Makar and Devon Toews, before beating Binnington, who plays for the St. Louis Blues, with a slick forehand-backhand deke.

Canada struggled to pull even, squandering a long 5-on-3 power play, but Makar finally tied it 1-1 late in the second with a shot from the right circle. It capped a dominant period for the Canadians, who outshot the U.S. 19-8 in the frame and 27-16 through the first two periods.

Werenski watched much of it from the bench. He had skated just 7:05 on 10 shifts entering the third. The U.S. coaching staff, led by New York Rangers coach Mike Sullivan, gave a predominant amount of ice time to one offensive defenseman, Quinn Hughes, plus three more defensive-oriented blue-liners.

In the third, Canada's attack continued its domination, forcing Hellebuyck to make multiple saves that kept it tied. Canada outshot the U.S. 41-26 in regulation, but Binnington also needed to make huge saves to keep the U.S. from scoring on a power play late in the third.

WSYX ABC / Rick Nash rooted for one player as U.S. beat Canada for first gold in 46 years

By Kellyanne Sitts – February 23, 2026

Rick Nash knows what it takes to win Olympic gold, and on Sunday he watched a moment he once lived out himself — this time with another Columbus Blue Jackets player at the center of it.

Nash, the Blue Jackets' director of player personnel and a former CBJ forward, won gold medals with Team Canada in 2010 and 2014. "It's just a moment that you kind of dreamed about your whole life and you can only really relate it to winning a Stanley Cup in the hockey world," Nash said.

On Sunday, Team USA beat Canada 2-1 in overtime to win its first gold medal in 46 years. Nash said he wasn't rooting for a particular team, but for one player: Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski.

"I was watching as a complete fan, which was really exciting. But I was obviously pulling for Zach (Werenski)," Nash said.

Werenski helped create the tournament's memorable finish when he set up Jack Hughes for the game-winning goal. Nash said the moment carried special meaning in Columbus.

"He's such a big part of our organization and big part of our city, so for him to get the primary assist on the game-winning goal, it was so special. And I'm so happy for him and his family," Nash said.

Werenski was able to live out his Olympic dream, but his former CBJ teammate, the late great Johnny Gaudreau, is not able to. To pay tribute to Johnny's life and career, Werenski and his American teammates skated after the game with the No. 13 jersey and included his kids in the team photo. Nash said the moment was both painful and meaningful as the organization continues to feel Gaudreau's absence.

"It was kind of a heart-breaking moment, but at the same time, such a proud moment to be able to get to know that family and to get to know Johnny and what kind of person he was. You can really see the kind of legacy that he left on the Blue Jackets and in USA hockey. We miss him every day and people obviously still care about him very greatly," Nash said.

Werenski became the first Blue Jackets player to win a gold medal for the United States and the second CBJ player to win gold, joining Nash. Werenski's six points in the tournament are also the most by a CBJ player in the Olympics.

The Blue Jackets resume play on the road against the Bruins this Thursday at 7 p.m.

"I'm sure there's going to be lots of bumps and bruises on a lot of the players, but the one thing I noticed was the pace was so high when you watched that gold medal game. And I hate to say it, but the regular season kind of the pace is not as high as that gold medal game," Nash said about the NHL resuming play.

"Hopefully Zach can come back feeling good, feeling healthy, and hopefully lead by example and bring our players to that pace that he just played at for the last two weeks."

The Athletic / Trump invites gold-winning U.S. men's hockey team to State of the Union

By Michael Russo – February 23, 2026

MILAN — President Donald Trump invited the United States men's hockey team to Tuesday night's State of the Union address in Washington, D.C., and said he wanted to honor the team at the White House on Wednesday.

During a postgame celebration inside the winning locker room at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena on Sunday night after the U.S. defeated Canada, the president called to congratulate the team for winning the country's first men's hockey gold medal in 46 years. Video of the call appeared on X.

With FBI director Kash Patel holding what appeared to be his cell phone with the initials "DT" on the home screen, Trump, on speaker phone, told players and staff he'd send a military plane to pick them up and bring them to Washington for the State of the Union. The team was scheduled to charter from Milan to Miami on Monday after having its original flight to New York changed due to the winter storm hitting the northeast.

"We're in," one player yelled.

"Can you pick us up in Miami on Tuesday morning?" another asked.

Trump congratulated the men for playing an "unbelievable game" and said, "Your goalie played not bad."

As players roared when the president shouted out Connor Hellebuyck for his masterpiece in earning the United States its third men's hockey gold medal, Hellebuyck yelled, "How you doing, Don?"

Patel yelled excitedly, "You boys are going to the State of the Union!"

"Thank you, Mr. President," a player said.

Trump added that after Tuesday night's State of the Union, "We'll do the White House the next day. We'll just have some fun. We have medals for you guys. ... I must tell you, we're going to have to bring the women's team, you do know that." Trump joked that he'd "probably be impeached" if he didn't invite the gold medal-winning women's team.

The invitations could lead to a delicate issue for the American NHLers because they're expected to return to their NHL teams on Tuesday, with eight games set for Wednesday involving 12 players from the United States' 25-player roster, including Hellebuyck (his Winnipeg Jets play in Vancouver) and overtime hero Jack Hughes (his New Jersey Devils host Tage Thompson's Buffalo Sabres), as the league's regular season resumes.

On Thursday, there are 12 NHL games involving 16 players on the roster. The New York Rangers, coached by U.S. head coach Mike Sullivan and assistant coach David Quinn, and Minnesota Wild, coached by USA assistant coach John Hynes, play that night.

U.S. team general manager Bill Guerin, also the Wild's GM, told The Athletic via text that he's fine with Wild players Quinn Hughes, Matt Boldy and Brock Faber going to the State of Union and White House if they want to. He said he's not sure what other teams will decide. The Wild resume their season Thursday night at Colorado.

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic that players can decide on an individual basis if they want accept the invitation and then it'll be up to their individual teams whether or not to grant permission.

Trump said if they can work it out, "I would be honored to have you."

Patel, invited into the locker room by his friend, Guerin, responded, "I got it, boss. I got it. ... I'm on it. I'm f—ing on it."

Trump told the players, "You're going to be proud of that game for 50 years as you grow older."

He added, "Tuesday night, I want to shake hands with everybody, but I gotta shake hands with that goalie."

Patel, who also attended the United States' semifinal win over Slovakia on Friday night, has been under scrutiny for using a U.S. government/Justice Department jet to fly to Milan for the Olympics, and for celebrating the gold medal win amid other serious obligations of his job.

There are several videos from inside the locker room posted on X showing Patel partying with the USA hockey team after the game.

There is precedent for gold-medalists missing NHL games after the Olympics.

When Sweden won gold at the 2006 Turin Olympics, capturing the country's first win in a best-on-best tournament, the players took a detour to Stockholm before returning to their NHL jobs.

"In the hours that followed, the Swedish team had a choice to make," Mats Sundin wrote in his 2024 book, "Home and Away." "It was Sunday, February 26, and many of us had NHL games scheduled on the coming Tuesday. Was forty-eight hours enough time to fly to Stockholm for a celebration, then get back to North America to rejoin our teams? Probably not, but we would do it anyway."

Sundin described the impromptu gold-medal celebration as a "magical day" and "dream come true."

When the team's charter flight entered Swedish airspace, two JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets flanked its plane and guided it home to Arlanda Airport. Fire trucks lined the runway and doused the plane in celebration, and tens of thousands greeted players in Medborgarplatsen, the square in central Stockholm, for a celebration.

The players topped it off with one final team dinner and party before returning to North America.

Sundin made it back in time for the Toronto Maple Leafs' first post-Olympics game, playing the same day he flew back, straight off the plane. But multiple other players missed games, including Henrik Lundqvist, Nicklas Lidstrom, Niklas Kronwall, Henrik Zetterberg and Mikael Samuelsson.