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**October 22, 2024**

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## [BlueJackets.com / Chemistry key to success of Blue Jackets' top line](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 22, 2024

Sean Monahan hails from Brampton, Ontario – about 5,500 miles from Omsk, Russia, and even a little further away from Barnaul, Russia.

But when he lines up a few feet between Omsk native Yegor Chinakhov and Barnaul's Kirill Marchenko on the ice on the top line for the Blue Jackets, he might as well be an honorary Russian.

At least that's the way Chinakhov and said have started to view their new center.

"We call him Monahanov," Marchenko joked after another recent standout performance for the trio. "It's like his Russian last name. He'll start to speak Russian, I think, after a couple of months."

The often ebullient Marchenko was joking, of course, and Monahan acknowledged he hasn't yet picked up much in the way of the Russian language. Nor has he quite yet built an appreciation for Russian music, despite his linemate's best efforts.

"Marchy played a song yesterday (and) honestly, I thought he was singing," Monahan said with a laugh.

Despite the fact the three hail from worlds away from one another, the chemistry has been quick. Chinakhov hopped onto the line late in the preseason after the injury to Boone Jenner, but the trio hasn't missed a beat, turning into one of the best lines in the NHL in the early going.

They may be from different parts of the world, but they've found a common language on the ice.

"We speak in Spanish," Chinakhov joked the other day.

Clearly, though, the three are on to something, and it all does start with communication. Chinakhov and Marchenko already have a relationship, of course, as they spend some time together in the offseason in Russia and have played together for the past two seasons in Columbus.

Monahan has come in and immediately been able to make an impact between the two talented snipers, and he said the key is in the relationship the three have already built.

"Honestly, I think it's a lot of communication," said Monahan, who couldn't help but smile when talking about the personalities of the two Russian wings. "We talk a lot. I'm actually surprised by how much we've been talking. It's going well. I think we can improve, help each other out and play a little bit closer together. Once chemistry really starts to kick in, I think we can be dangerous every night."

The veteran center is understating things, though, because the trio has already been hard to handle for opponents. The impacts have been felt in traditional stats – the three have combined for seven goals and 18 points in the first five games, and outscored opponents 6-2 when on the ice at 5-on-5 – and in the analytics realm.

According to MoneyPuck.com, the line is the best in the NHL with at least 40 minutes played at 5-on-5 when it comes to expected goals percentage, with an xG mark of 79.6 percent. Expected goals is a measure of both shot quantity and quality, meaning that trio has both had the puck and been creating scoring opportunities with it. In all, they've put 47 shots on goal at 5-on-5 compared to just 14 for the opposition.

"Everything," head coach Dean Evason said when asked what he liked about the line after Thursday's win vs. Buffalo. "They're not only creating offensively, but tonight, we played them against (Tage)

Thompson's line for the most part, which is a tough challenge. They're doing the right things defensively as well."

While it appears the Blue Jackets might switch things up for Tuesday's game in an effort to spread out some offense given all the injuries in the forward group – Cole Sillinger joined Monahan and Marchenko on a line at Monday's practice, while Chinakhov skated with Adam Fantilli and Mikael Pyyhtia – Evason said it's good to know he can always go back to the grouping when the need arises.

And the good news is no matter where he puts Monahan, Evason knows he's going to get a solid effort. Now in his 12th season in the NHL, Monahan is a well-rounded hockey player, from consistent scoring – he has eight 20-goal campaigns – to excellent faceoff skills (54.9 percent so far this year) to solid positioning and defensive play.

"Probably him," Evason said when asked the key to the line. "As you guys have seen, he's healthy. His skating is fantastic. He's team first. He's just first over the boards, for penalty kill, for power play – everything basically. When you're talking about people that are going to step up in a leadership role, you don't have to look too much further than that. He's a leader in all areas, not only on that line but on our hockey club."

When asked, both Chinakhov and Marchenko went out of their way to credit Monahan for making it easy on them to produce.

"Every time, he's in good position," Marchenko said. "He makes a pass every time. He wins the battles. There's a lot of talk on the ice. He has a lot of experience in the NHL, and he really helps us."

Added Chinakhov: "He's a very smart guy, and he has played a lot in the NHL already. He just helps us and teaches us some lessons."

Marchenko and Chinakhov can teach Monahan some things as well – in particular, a little bit of their native tongue.

"I think he will (learn some Russian), but not now," Marchenko said. "We'll give him a little time."

## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets cap homestand by facing Toronto](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 22, 2024

After four games of what head coach Dean Evason called “winning hockey” to start the season, the Blue Jackets found out Saturday night what happens if they’re a little bit off their game.

The injury-ravaged Blue Jackets couldn’t get much traction going, falling 3-1 to the visiting Minnesota Wild. A slow start put the team behind the eight ball, and while the team did get better as the game went on, it couldn’t break through a stingy Wild defense.

Evason said Monday that a look at the video tape showed the performance wasn’t as bad as it seemed on first look, though it was apparent the Blue Jackets didn’t have the same energy as they had in the opening quartet of games.

And unfortunately for the Jackets, with the players that are currently out, it’s a squad that needs to be close to the top of its game right now.

“We didn’t play the first period the same way as we’ve played through all the games, obviously, so far here in the regular season,” Evason said. “We hope and believe it’s a one-off. ... It’s one period, but we gotta catch it right now. Second period was good, but it’s not enough. You have to start correctly, and we have to find a way to do that as a coaching staff and as a team.”

In the locker room, the postgame reaction was that the Blue Jackets knew they needed to be better, and in particular start better. The Blue Jackets players who met with the media acknowledged just how important it is to bring the same level of play on a night in, night out basis.

“We have a standard now on how we have to play, and we’ve done that for four games,” alternate captain Zach Werenski said. “Tonight, we weren’t there. We’re going to learn from it and we’re going to move on, and we’re not going to let it happen again.”

Tonight, the goal will be to put in a full 60 minutes against a Toronto team on the second half of a back-to-back.

“We catch ourselves and we start correctly tomorrow night,” Evason said Monday.

### **Know The Foe: Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Head coach:** Craig Berube (First season)

**Team stats:** Goals per game: 3.33 (16th) | Scoring defense: 2.17 (5th) | PP: 15.0 percent (25th) | PK: 84.6 percent (11th)

**The narrative:** One year after Toronto won a postseason series for the first time in two decades, heartbreak returned to the city last year as the Leafs lost in overtime of Game 7 of the first round vs. Longtime nemesis Boston. The most talked about team in hockey made some changes – in particular, the hiring of Stanley Cup-winning coach Berube – but it’s still a squad built around the highly powered forward quartet of Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Mitchell Marner and John Tavares.

**Team leaders:** Coming off a career-best 98-point season, Nylander is off to another good start, scoring twice vs. Tampa Bay last night to get to five goals on the campaign, tied for fifth in the NHL. After leading the NHL with 69 goals a season ago – the most in the league since Teemu Selanne and Alexander Mogilny had 76 in 1992-93 – Auston Matthews has three goals in the first six games. Marner has a 1-6-7 line to start the season, while Max Domi has added six assists.

In net, free-agent pickup Anthony Stolarz beat Tampa Bay to improve to 3-2-0 on the season with a 1.83 GAA and .938 save percentage. Tonight's goalie will likely be either Joseph Woll making his season debut after missing the start of the season with injury or rookie Dennis Hildeby, who made 21 saves on 23 shots to get the win in his only start thus far.

**What's new:** After last night's 5-2 win vs. the Lightning, the Leafs are off to a 3-2-0 start. The big offseason changes to the squad came on defense, where veterans Chris Tanev and Oliver Ekman-Larsson were added to bring some defensive prowess to the squad. Longtime NHLer Max Pacioretty and Steven Lorentz were also signed to bring depth up front, while Stolarz has been a big pickup in net.

**Trending:** Columbus won two of the three matchups a season ago, posting matching 6-5 OT victories on Dec. 14 in Toronto and Dec. 29 in Columbus.

**Former CBJ:** The well-traveled Domi is on his seventh NHL team but seems to have found a home in Toronto, where his dad is a Leafs legend, as he four-year deal with the squad in the offseason.

### Projected Lineup (subject to change)

LW 4 Cole Sillinger	C 23 Sean Monahan	RW 86 Kirill Marchenko
LW 82 Mikael Pyyhtia	C 19 Adam Fantilli	RW 59 Yegor Chinakhov
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 40 Daniil Tarasov (starter)
LD 2 Jake Christiansen	RD 78 Damon Severson	G 90 Elvis Merzlikins
LD 3 Jack Johnson	RD 55 David Jiricek	

**Scratches:** Kent Johnson (upper body), Jordan Harris

**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 switched up the lines in practice Monday in an effort to look for more balance up front. Chinakhov moved to skate with Fantilli and Pyyhtia, while Sillinger looks set to move from center to the wing with Monahan and Marchenko. Tarasov will make his third straight start in net.

### The Numbers Game

The trio of Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko has combined for 18 points through the first four games of the season (7-11-18). ... Chinakhov leads all CBJ skaters with six points (3-4-7) on the season and has a point in all five games. ... It is the sixth time in franchise history a player has had at least a five-game point streak to begin the season, joining Jaroslav Spacek (2002), Ryan Johansen (2014, '15), Nick Foligno (2014) and Patrik Laine (2021). Johansen (10 games in 2014) and Foligno (six in '14) are the only players to start a season with a six-game point streak. ... Monahan is four assists away from 300 in his NHL career, while Damon Severson is five points away from 300.

### This Day in CBJ History

**Oct. 22, 2000:** Steve Heinze scores the first-ever extra-attacker goal in team history, tying the score at 1 with exactly a minute to play in regulation against Detroit in Nationwide Arena. The Red Wings would go on to win in overtime on a goal by Kirk Maltby.

**Oct. 22, 2011:** Rick Nash becomes the first Blue Jacket to skate in 600 games with the team, doing so in a game at Ottawa.

**Oct. 22, 2016:** Sergei Bobrovsky makes 32 saves in the Blue Jackets' first shutout win of the season, a 3-0 blanking of the Stars in Dallas. The win was Bobrovsky's 100th with Columbus, making him the first (and so far only) CBJ goalie to reach that mark.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets Stats Thru 5 Games

By Jason Newland – October 22, 2024

Sure it's only been five games, but there are positives from those games.

The Blue Jackets are 2-3 with four points and currently sit 7th in the Metro, 14th in the East, and 26th in the NHL.

Let's look at some stats for the CBJ and where they rank league-wide in others.

### **Goals**

1. Yegor Chiankhov - 3
2. Sean Monahan - 2
3. Zach Werenski - 2
4. 3 others with 2

### **Assists**

1. Kirill Marchenko - 4
2. Yegor Chinakhov - 4
3. Damon Severson - 3
4. 3 others with 3

### **Points**

1. Yegor Chinakhov - 7 - Tied for 5th in the league
2. Kirill Marchenko - 6
3. Sean Monahan - 5
4. Kent Johnson - 5

### **ADVERTISING**

#### **+/- Leaders**

1. Yegor Chinakhov - +5 - Tied for 6th in the league
2. Damon Severson - +3
3. Kirill Marchenko - +3
4. Jake Christiansen - +2

#### **CBJ Goalie Stats**

- Elvis Merzljikins - 2 Starts - 0-2 - 3.68 GAA - .854 save % - Goals Allowed - 7
- Daniil Tarasov - 3 Starts - 2-1 - 3.70 GAA - .876 save % - Goals Allowed - 11

#### **League-Wide**

Goals Scored - 18 - 15<sup>th</sup>

## The Hockey Writers / Kent Johnson's All-Around Abilities Makes Injury Absence More Profound to Blue Jackets

By William Espy – October 22, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets' current injury struggles are well-documented. Our Mark Scheig discussed a few of them and the updates provided by head coach Dean Evason earlier this week. The most recent player to find himself out for the foreseeable future is Kent Johnson, and with how much Evason relied on him in the first four games, he's going to be a major loss for a team that has already lost plenty of key players.

Prior to Johnson's injury, which resulted from a collision with teammate James van Riemsdyk, the Blue Jackets were already going deep into their cupboards for talent. Captain Boone Jenner, Dmitri Voronkov, Justin Danforth, and Erik Gudbranson are all on the injured reserve at the moment, with Danforth likely to return in the near future. They're not the only ones out with injuries though, as prospects Cayden Lindstrom, who was the fourth-overall pick in the 2024 Draft, Jordan Dumais, and Gavin Brindley also find themselves on the injured reserve.

Now with Johnson on the sidelines as well, the Blue Jackets lost a player whose importance to the team has quickly skyrocketed early this season. He's been a key member of both the power play and penalty kill, now Evason will have to reach even further into the cupboard to find a replacement and it seems like he'll need someone else to fill Johnson's role for a considerable amount of time.

### **An Offensive Threat**

Coming out of his draft year, everyone knew that Johnson would be a menace offensively at the NHL level relatively quickly. Following his collegiate stint with the University of Michigan of the NCAA, he immediately made an impact with the Blue Jackets during his rookie season. During that season, he put up 40 points, 16 of which were goals, in 79 games.

Similar to a few other Blue Jackets who have broken into the NHL in recent memory, Johnson had a sophomore slump that was cut short by a shoulder injury. During the 2023-24 season, he only played in 42 games and put up a disappointing total of 16 points. Since the new coaching staff took over though, he's seemed back on track. Prior to his injury, he had two goals and three assists in four games. He was keeping up with the team's top performers like Yegor Chinakhov, Kirill Marchenko, and the newly acquired Sean Monahan. His offensive presence will certainly be missed by the Blue Jackets until he's cleared to return.

### **New Responsibilities**

Under Evason, Johnson has gotten even more responsibilities. As a player who was never really known for his defensive game, he previously wasn't thought of as a penalty killer. Under the new coaching staff though, they saw something they liked out of the 22-year-old and threw him into an entirely new role for the 2024-25 season. He thrived in the role, despite the fact that the team as a whole was struggling to kill the opposition's power plays.

Losing a key member of both the powerplay and penalty kill makes it much more difficult for the Blue Jackets to manage their lineup moving forward. The only injuries that are similar in importance at the moment will be those of Jenner and Voronkov, who are also key players who may not see the ice in the near future.



While Johnson's injury in the 2023-24 season was certainly not ideal for the Blue Jackets, he's quickly become much more important to the organization as a whole with his increased responsibility both offensively and defensively. He was expected to help fill the hole left by Jenner and Voronkov until they could make their respective returns, but now he's on the sidelines himself with no expected return date.

## The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: Five early-season storylines I don't believe in (yet)

By Sean McIndoe – October 22, 2024

We're two weeks into the season. Do you know what to believe?

Probably not, unless you're delusional. A typical NHL season doesn't tip its hand this early, and will even toss a few decoys our way to throw us off the scent of what's really going on. Nobody should be quite sure what they believe, unless it's you guys having zero faith in Sam Reinhart — who leads the league in scoring, by the way.

So no, I'm not quite sure what I'm buying into yet. But I'm starting to narrow down the list, which is where we'll start with this week's bonus five.

**Bonus five:** Early stories that I'm not buying, at least not yet

**5.** The Flames are good! — The Flames are already shaping up as one of the great “nobody believed in us” stories in recent years (although just for the record, Flames fans, you didn't believe in them either). You can't complain about a .900 points percentage, but that doesn't mean you have to think Calgary is a playoff team. It's not. Unless it is, but check back in a month.

**4.** The Avalanche are bad! — While they do drop out of this week's top five, that has more to do with other teams making a case for consideration than the Avalanche dropping out of contention; if the list were a top 10, they'd still be solidly on it. The goaltending is a concern, absolutely. But there's too much talent here for me to even think of writing them off, or even lowering my expectations all that much.

**3.** The Canucks are meh! — Wait, can you use an exclamation point with “meh”? I'm not sure you can. But while I'm not expecting the Canucks to have the sort of everything-goes-in start to the season they did last year, I think they've been fine given Thatcher Demko is out of the lineup and Elias Pettersson is playing like he is. Sure, you'd prefer a bit more than fine, but it's early and I'm not concerned.

**2.** Filip Gustavsson has as many goals as Connor Bedard, Jake Guentzel, Steven Stamkos, Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin — I predict this will not be the case at the end of the year. Must credit me if I'm correct. Also, this was just an excuse to remind you goalie goals are the coolest.

**1.** The Wild being in the Central mix — Gustavsson's team is one of four left without a regulation loss, and there's reason to believe this year may be different. But while 3-0-2 is impressive, two of those wins came against the Blue Jackets. They did beat the Blues, and got a point against the unbeatable Jets, but I'm not sold yet. Maybe this week will do it, as a long road trip continues with stops in Sunrise and Tampa Bay.

A few things you'll notice I didn't mention, because I'm already starting to find myself nodding along: The Jets being one of the league's better teams, Nikita Kucherov looking like a Rocket Richard winner, Utah being the league's most entertaining watch, Evgeni Malkin going late-career beast mode, and the Flyers and Sabres being bad. But I'll take another week on those.

For now, let's get to this week's rankings.

**Goaltenders:** Being weird and surprisingly uncoordinated since 1873.

**5.** New Jersey Devils (5-2-1, +7 true goals differential\*) — The Avalanche aren't being banished; consider this more of a timeout. This spot came down to the Jets and the Devils, and I decided to go with New Jersey after thinking about it for 10 seconds. If you think that's not enough time, Nico Hischier disagrees.

4. Edmonton Oilers (2-4-0, -12) — We're holding our preseason favorite in the top five, and if that seems unconscionable to you then please revisit last week's reminder about taking the long-term view. Still, there are all sorts of reasons for worry here, especially around goaltending and special teams. Their numbers in those categories are so bad they quite literally can't continue, but there's legitimate concern here and we can't keep the Oilers around forever. Carolina will be a good test tomorrow.

3. New York Rangers (4-0-1, +14) — Note to self: Do not give up on No. 1 picks just because they don't light it up in their first year or two.

(No chance I actually learn this lesson. Macklin Celebrini is a bum, I barely noticed him all week.)

2. Florida Panthers (4-2-1, -1) — Beating a good Golden Knights team without Matthew Tkachuk or Aleksander Barkov is a nice sign the Panthers are back after an uneven opening week.

1. Dallas Stars (5-1-0, +8) — Even with the Oilers' slow start, Saturday's win was a flex. Oh, and they got the franchise goaltender signed to an extension. Solid week.

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

**Not ranked:** Hold that thought — We're mixing it up this week. We're still going to have two "not ranked" teams worth carving out some time to look at in more depth. But this week, we're posting them both in the bottom section, for reasons that will become apparent.

### The bottom five

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

5. Montreal Canadiens (2-3-1, -4) — So far they've been fine, but there's still plenty of room to get better, as Arpon covers here.

4. Anaheim Ducks (2-2-1, -3) — We love us some good early-season trade speculation, don't we folks? In the meantime, the Ducks have been reasonably solid early on, looking like a team ready to take the next step in a rebuild by at least being competitive.

3. Chicago Blackhawks (2-3-1, -3) — Laz has an interesting take on Lukas Reichel, the tricky path to developing young talent and whether the Hawks are screwing it all up.

2. Columbus Blue Jackets (2-3-0, 0) — In a season that was always likely to be more about developing the future than winning in the present, this sort of injury news is especially tough:

1. San Jose Sharks (0-4-2, -13) — While there hasn't been a ton of good news on the big-league roster, Yaroslav Askarov has looked great in the AHL. You figure it can't be long until we see him as the starter in San Jose. And once we do, it might be a while before we see anyone else in that role.

**Not ranked:** Nashville Predators and Detroit Red Wings — Every year, at least a couple of teams get off to the sort of disappointing starts that can torpedo what was supposed to be a breakout season. But only once in a while, when we're very lucky, the schedule-makers serve up an early showdown between those two teams. Call it the Panic Bowl. Or just call it a must-win. But if you're lucky enough to not be a fan of either team, you grab your popcorn and watch it play out.

We got that matchup this year, when the 1-3-0 Red Wings headed to Nashville to face the 0-4-0 Predators on Saturday afternoon in a game so big Luke Schenn invited his whole family. For those keeping track, that's two teams that both came into the season with high hopes and entered the game with one win between them. I ran through the numbers through Dom's model and it came back with one win being not good.

The fun part is that while both teams came into the season with similar expectations of improvement, they landed there in very different ways. In Nashville, it was all about aggressive ambition — taking a team that had already made the playoffs and spending the summer making it significantly better. If that means stealing away other team’s franchise players on the open market, so be it. For Barry Trotz, being first-round fodder wasn’t good enough anymore in Nashville.

In Detroit? Well, it would be a step up for a team that hasn’t been in the postseason since 2016. But Steve Yzerman has been taking a decidedly different approach, following a slow-and-steady building blueprint that’s made the Red Wings a little bit better each year since he arrived in 2019. That’s been a mixed blessing, and lately, it feels like an increasingly impatient fan base is starting to focus less on the “better” part of that equation and more on the “little bit.” This had to be the year they finally made the playoffs, whether the GM was a franchise icon or not.

And yet we went into the weekend with the Red Wings struggling and the Predators looking even worse. One team would get a desperately needed win, the other would be plunged even further into crisis.

And, well ... congratulations to the Red Wings. They were badly outshot but played well enough to ice a 5-2 road win. Full-blown crisis averted, for a few more days at least.

As for Nashville, it’s hard to imagine a more disastrous start. Even looking beyond the ugly 0-5-0 record, this team is a mess. They’ve scored three or fewer in every game and given up three or more in every game, and that doesn’t add up to a winning mix. Newly extended Juuse Saros is off to a slow start. Steven Stamkos has one point. Roman Josi is minus-5. It’s bad.

What now? It’s the kind of start that gets coaches fired, although with Andrew Brunette having just one season under his belt, that would feel like a panic move. But the thing about panic moves is sometimes the panic is justified. Maybe the Predators aren’t quite there yet, but they’ve got a tough one against the Bruins tomorrow and then matchups against the Blackhawks and Blue Jackets in which they’ll be favorites. If it turns into another lost week, things might be looking very ugly indeed by next week’s rankings.

## ESPN / NHL panic meters: Should Oilers, Avs, others be worried?

By Kristen Shilton – October 22, 2024

### Reactions

The 2024-25 NHL season is just two weeks old and already chock-full of surprises.

Did we expect the Winnipeg Jets to be the last undefeated team? Or for the Calgary Flames to be steamrolling the competition? And what of the Utah Hockey Club, making expansion life look good?

It's been an exciting run -- for some. For others, not so much. There are backs against the wall, so to speak.

But it's still early ... right?

These five teams had better hope so.

We're breaking down the clubs who came into the 2024-25 campaign rife with expectations that haven't quite lived up to the hype. What's holding them back? And how worried should fans be about their trajectory from here?

**It's our (probably) too-early Panic Meter readings! Let's dissect the candidates:**

### Carolina Hurricanes

**Stanley Cup odds:** +1400

**Record:** 2-2-0, sixth in Metro

**The problems:** Granted, the Hurricanes are only four games into their season. It's still strange to see them at only the .500 mark and ahead of just the Philadelphia Flyers and Columbus Blue Jackets in the Metro Division.

So, yes -- it's a small sample size. But Carolina has had some glaring inconsistencies, too. The Hurricanes are hurting themselves as the fourth-most penalized team in the league (averaging over five minutes per game), and that's been a costly, momentum-crushing trend, taxing their 13th-ranked penalty kill (83.3%) while keeping top-end skaters like Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov from doing what they do best on the offensive end. Carolina is 19th overall offensively (3.00 goals per game), and averaging the sixth-most shots (32.8), so the opportunities to challenge opponents are clearly there. It's a matter of the Hurricanes not being their own worst enemy.

Carolina knew going into the season that (a) goalie health and (b) goalie performance would be significant factors, and while Frederik Andersen has been good so far, his counterpart Pyotr Kochetkov has struggled. The young netminder is 1-1-0 with an .867 SV% and 3.05 GAA, compared to Andersen's .936 SV% and 1.53 GAA. Andersen has been run aground by injuries in the past, so coach Rod Brind'Amour must be able to rely on Kochetkov to support the veteran. That's still a work in progress.

Another cause for concern is the roller coaster that is Carolina's top defensive unit. Brent Burns and Jacob Slavin were on the ice for three of four goals against in the Hurricanes' loss to the St. Louis Blues, right after sparking Carolina to a dominant win against the Pittsburgh Penguins. Burns is nearing 40 years old, and it shows in his foot speed; carrying nearly 23 minutes per game may not be sustainable, and it will require others on Carolina's back end to step up at some point and perhaps remove part of that pressure.

**Panic meter reading:** 5.5/10. The Hurricanes have kept up in every game; it's the little mistakes they has to start cleaning up, though. Bad habits have a way of snowballing, and that's a real worry. Eliminating bad penalties and maximizing their scoring depth -- it's defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere currently leading the team in goals, with three -- will give Carolina more breathing room, and that should push the Hurricanes up the standings.

If anything, it feels like Carolina is still searching for its identity and given the short runway they've had into the season that's not shocking. Time is always of the essence -- but in this case at least it's on the Hurricanes' side.

## **Colorado Avalanche**

**Stanley Cup odds:** +1200

**Record:** 2-4-0, seventh in Central

**The problems:** Colorado's season began 0-4-0 for just the second time in franchise history (the other occurrence being 1998-99); it took overcoming a two-goal deficit against the Anaheim Ducks on Friday for the Avalanche to eventually earn their elusive first win of the year (in overtime, no less). Sunday's 4-1 win over the San Jose Sharks -- featuring a pair of goals from Ross Colton and three points by Cale Makar -- is another step in the right direction. But Colorado has to prove it can produce positive results against the league's would-be contenders too along the way here too.

The Avalanche are 32nd already in goals against per game (4.83), due in large part to atrocious goaltending. Aleksandar Georgiev is 1-3-0 with an .811 save percentage and 4.99 goals-against average through Colorado's first five outings. Over those initial four losses, Colorado's starter had let in a league-high 17 goals. All the goal-scoring magic Nathan MacKinnon could muster won't make up for that sort of leaky netminding.

Special teams have been a hindrance as well. Colorado picked up where it left off in the second half of last season with an inconsistent penalty kill (29th in the league, at 68.4% through six games) that's overshadowing their second-ranked power play (38.1%). Again, goaltending woes play a factor in those poor short-handed stats, but the Avalanche's top penalty-killing unit (anchored by Makar and Colton) isn't getting the job done either in front of Georgiev.

That said, the Avalanche are missing key pieces from the lineup, including Gabriel Landeskog, Jonathan Drouin, Valeri Nichushkin, Devon Toews and Artturi Lehkonen. Having their lineup impacted to that degree, with no way to replace it, and dealing with seriously subpar goaltending are daunting tasks. Colorado has to be up for the challenge.

**Panic meter reading:** 7.5/10. The Avalanche have MacKinnon and Makar, plus a fiery Mikko Rantanen. That's a top-tier trio with game-changing potential (and it was MacKinnon, of course, who potted that OT winner against the Ducks to secure Colorado's initial win). The Avalanche have been stingy defensively, sitting fourth best in shots against per game (25.5) and they've done well generating scoring opportunity up front, particularly from the slot.

That diminished scoring depth has contributed to why more chances aren't going in (Colorado is 11th in goals, averaging 3.50 per game) but there's a bright spot there as well: coach Jared Bednar said over the weekend he hopes Nichushkin, who is back skating on his own while completing a six-month suspension in Stage 3 of the NHL/NHLPA assistance program, will be able to return by Nov. 13.

What the Avalanche must hope for is that its goaltending will improve, too. Colorado claimed goaltender Kaapo Kahkonen off waivers over a week ago, and he was finally able to join the team on Saturday after dealing with immigration issues. Once he's up to speed, there's no doubt Colorado will insert him to take

the edge off Georgiev. At the same time, Colorado has to push Georgiev into turning the corner, too. With a victory under his belt, now there's reason for the goaltender to feel better about his own game and allow that to translate into stringing further wins together for Colorado from here.

The Avalanche don't have cap space available to immediately address any areas of concern, so getting more out of the current roster is their only way to dig out of this early deficit.

### **Detroit Red Wings**

**Stanley Cup odds:** +6000

**Record:** 2-3-0, eighth in Atlantic

**The problems:** The Red Wings are off to a glacial 2-3-0 start that includes a pair of victories over the league's only winless team (Nashville). That's not a ringing endorsement for where Detroit could be headed. This was supposed to be a season where the Red Wings finally punched their way back to the playoffs after being absent since 2015-16. Detroit came achingly close in 2023-24, falling just short of a postseason berth with a tie-breaking loss to Washington at the very end. The Red Wings might have hoped for some momentum to carry over into the new campaign, but it's been a tough slog (other than when they've faced the Predators, naturally).

Detroit's injured list has begun to fill up, with Tyler Motte and Christian Fischer suffering ailments already. But that's no excuse. The Red Wings' overall execution has lacked more than anything, particularly off the draw. Detroit is 27th in FOW% (46.4%) and they've seen momentum snatched away from goals scored directly off a poorly executed faceoff (see New York Rangers winger Reilly Smith's marker last week). Good teams have the details dialled in; Detroit is still getting there.

The Red Wings' special teams are another issue. Detroit owns the second-worst penalty kill in the league (62.5%) and their power play is mediocre (15.8%). Those areas of the game that could boost the Red Wings aren't coming through often enough, and it's dragging them down. The same is true with their collective team defense, a longtime concern that's failed to improve over time. Detroit is tied for the second-most shots against per game (34.2) and even solid goaltending from both Alex Lyon (1-1-0, .938 SV%, 2.06 GAA) and Cam Talbot (1-1-0, 907 SV% and 3.31 GAA) can't fill the void.

**Panic meter reading:** 6.5/10. Detroit's early schedule has been odd, with the two outings against Nashville and two meetings already with the Rangers. Regardless, the Red Wings are showcasing too many of the same past problems to completely say they're on track to a different outcome than seasons past. Detroit has allowed 15 total goals in those three losses. Even with the likes of Dylan Larkin (who has three goals), Andrew Copp (same) and offseason addition Vladimir Tarasenko (two goals) sparking the offense, the Red Wings need even more hands to get on the right side of these scoresheets.

It's really whether Detroit can go all-in defensively that will likely determine their fate (again). Expecting to outscore their other troubles -- at 5-on-5 or special teams -- hasn't worked before, and won't work this season. If Detroit can buy into what coach Derek Lalonde is preaching and keep getting capable goaltending and consistent scoring, its recipe for success could get it back in the postseason mix sooner rather than later.

### **Edmonton Oilers**

**Stanley Cup odds:** +750

**Record:** 2-4-0, seventh in Pacific

**The problems:** Edmonton is not getting the goaltending it needs -- and that's affecting everything else. Stuart Skinner is 1-3-0 with an .851 SV% and 4.03 GAA. His backup Calvin Pickard is 1-1-0 with an .852

SV% and 3.28 GAA. Those are tough numbers to overcome at the best of times, but especially when Edmonton is also not generating a consistent amount of top-end offense.

Leon Draisaitl has three goals on the season and Connor McDavid has a goal and six points, but head coach Kris Knobloch has kept them together on a line with Zach Hyman (who has zero points through six games) and it doesn't make sense to load up a single unit when the results are there often enough. The case in point: Edmonton had a disappointing 4-1 loss to the Dallas Stars on Saturday where the Oilers fell behind 3-0, and only Draisaitl's late-third-period goal kept Edmonton from being shut out for the second time in six games, the first one being a 6-0 drubbing by the Winnipeg Jets in their season opener.

While Draisaitl is the Oilers' leading scorer, he's also been punished by Knobloch already for poorly timed penalties. And Edmonton's special teams have been putrid as well -- the power play is operating at just 6.7% (good for 30th overall) and their penalty kill is dead-last in the NHL at 55%. When you're also averaging the fewest goals in the league (2.00) and are 27th in goals against (4.00), it's a brutal combination.

The bottom line for Edmonton is that until its offense improves, the results won't get better, either. It's on Knobloch to make the right adjustments -- at even strength and on the power play -- so the Oilers can thrive.

**Panic meter reading:** 8/10. Listen, the Oilers have fooled us before. Last season Edmonton started 2-9-1 and turned things around so drastically they wound up in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final. That's not to say history can repeat itself now, though. The Oilers' 1-4-0 start is nothing to feel good about, and shows there are an abundance of weaknesses in Edmonton's lineup that must be addressed.

It's not that the Oilers aren't getting their chances. They were the better team against Dallas in the first period on Saturday, but couldn't capitalize. The Stars took over from there and that spelled trouble for the Oilers. If they can find ways to make the most of those opportunities going forward, it'll be a different story.

On the plus side, Edmonton's depth has been solid. Jeff Skinner has four points in six games, Corey Perry has been his usual feisty self and there are significant signs of life on the back end. Edmonton has time to turn things around, but Knobloch must spread his talent out and let Draisaitl and McDavid drive their own lines. The goaltending and special teams must be looked into as well obviously, but what Edmonton needs more than ever is confidence. And that comes from stringing some wins together.

## **Nashville Predators**

**Stanley Cup odds:** +2000

**Record:** 0-5-0, eighth in Central

**The problems: Fun fact:** no NHL team that has started 0-5-0 has reached the postseason since 2005-06. And Nashville is exactly that, boasting (?) a franchise-worst start that took another blow in Saturday's lopsided 5-2 loss to Detroit. Suffice to say then, the Predators face an uphill battle to make the postseason.

Nashville's new-look lineup has fallen well short of expectations in a winless stretch to open this campaign -- they are the last remaining NHL team without a point, to boot -- and the issues keep stacking up.

Let's start at the beginning. Nashville is allowing the second-most goals (4.60 per game) and scoring the fewest (2.00). And that's while the Predators are also averaging the most shots (35.4 per game) in the



league. What conclusions can be drawn? Nashville's goaltending -- and ability to actually finish on their chances -- are out of whack.

Juuse Saros has looked humbly human in net for the Predators, with an 0-4-0 record, .875 SV% and 3.64 GAA. Scott Wedgewood is right behind him and absolutely no better at 0-1-0 with an .800 SV% and 4.21 GAA.

Offensively the Predators haven't looked nearly as dominant as predicted given the additions they made in the offseason. Highly prized free agent signees Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault haven't clicked yet in the system, and that's slowed the Predators' attack. Stamkos didn't score for the first time until Saturday's loss against Detroit, and while Marchessault has four points in five games, he hasn't been a real difference-maker out of the gate.

Nashville appears to be lacking chemistry, and head coach Andrew Brunette is at a loss already to find combinations that click.

**Panic meter reading:** 9.5/10. This team is in a bad spot. There's no way to sugarcoat being the only NHL club without a point, especially when the roster has such depth of talent. Nashville's defensive efforts haven't been terrible, either. The Predators have allowed the ninth fewest in shots against per game (27.4), but without the saves it doesn't mean much to be decent enough on the back end. Roman Josi is averaging over 27 minutes per game -- tied for most among defenseman with Quinn Hughes -- and that's a heavy ask of the 34-year-old.

Brunette said on Saturday the Predators' awful opening isn't for "lack of trying," and that's true. Nashville is clearly putting in effort. It's that the Predators are making big mistakes -- and there's no coming back from those on a shift-by-shift basis if your goaltending is a mess. And the more Nashville sees pucks going in, the more players are gripping their sticks too tightly -- compounding those infuriating errors.

Are there silver linings? Maybe. Filip Forsberg has been solid out of the gate -- he leads the team with two goals and five points -- and there is a genuinely strong leadership unit in the room headed by Ryan O'Reilly, Josi and, in time, Stamkos. The fact Nashville can at least create chances is good, too.

The only solution for Nashville? Find a way to win a game. It can be the scrappiest, ugliest, least aesthetically pleasing victory. But what this group needs more than anything is just to know it can get the job done once -- and confidence should build from there.