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February 6-10, 2026

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The Athletic / Blue Jackets at the break: What's changed under Bowness, and how they can still improve

By Aaron Portzline – February 6, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Rick Bowness said he was drawn to the Columbus Blue Jackets' coaching job, in part, because he looked up and down the roster and saw a collection of talent that should be performing better.

It was a conclusion drawn mostly from afar, because the only player in the room he'd coached previously was center Sean Monahan, who spent just 34 games under Bowness during the 2023-24 season with the Winnipeg Jets.

Bowness has seen from behind the bench that his belief was correct. The Blue Jackets are 10-1-0 under the 71-year-old, including a seven-game winning streak that has vaulted them to the edge of the playoff line in the Eastern Conference.

Additionally, he's learned a lot about the group behind the scenes, enough to know, he said, that he made the right decision when he stepped out of retirement on Jan. 12.

"I rely on Monny a lot, but I've gotten to know the leadership group very well," Bowness said after Wednesday's 4-0 win over the Chicago Blackhawks, the Blue Jackets' last game before their Olympic break.

"You watch them in practice and you watch them in the meal room ... all those little details, I'm watching the groups and everything. You learn a lot about your team in those situations, and I've learned that they're a close group that cares about each other, and it starts with that. If you don't care about each other, the on-ice product itself is going to be affected.

"They're a good group, and I really, really, really enjoy working with them. When I was out (retired), I missed that, just working with the players. And I just love this group."

The feeling, it would appear, is mutual.

What the Blue Jackets have done in less than a month is remarkable, going from a club that was sinking into a lottery-pick abyss to one that is now checking the standings and doing playoff math.

And the really interesting part?

Bowness hasn't really put his stamp on this club yet. There are several areas, both the coach and players say, where the Blue Jackets can still improve.

Here's a look at what's changed under Bowness that has given the Blue Jackets such optimism, along with a few key areas where they can still improve.

What's changed

Defensive indicators

On Day 1 of his Blue Jackets' tenure, Bowness made it clear that the first fix had to be on the defensive side of the puck. The Blue Jackets were bleeding goals and putting too much pressure on their goaltending.

It was an attitude shift as much as anything: confronting and pressuring the puck, not just defending as it comes at you. It's obvious that the confidence to play this way took a few games, but it's there now.

And it may seem counterintuitive to some still, but the best coaches in franchise history have all preached the same mantra: offense comes from defense. That is, checking creates chances. In all of the indicators Bowness mentioned — goals against, shots against, penalty kill, etc. — the Blue Jackets have been dramatically better.

Goals/game	2.91 (21st)	3.91 (7th)
Goals against/game	3.38 (28th)	2.18 (T-1st)
Shots against/game	30.9 (30th)	27.6 (T-16th)
Power play rate	18.8 (20th)	24.0 (13th)
Penalty kill rate	76.4 (29th)	81.3 (13th)

Identity forming

Bowness' comment after Wednesday's win over Chicago, that the Blue Jackets are "starting to understand when we can and cannot make plays," was interesting. Another way to "see" this is that the odd-man chances for opponents, while still an issue, have been greatly reduced.

The directive is for all four forward lines to look exactly the same when the Blue Jackets don't have the puck, Bowness said. Checking is for everyone. Nobody gets a pass. Responsible creativity is allowed when you have the puck, but a big part of team defense is trust.

These Blue Jackets are big and they can forecheck. It should hurt to play them. And that identity is forming once again.

Regulation wins

The current win streak marks the first time in franchise history that the Blue Jackets have won seven consecutive games in regulation. Even their 16-game win streak in 2016-17 didn't include seven victories in a row without an overtime or shootout win.

That's impressive. And important. Not only were the Blue Jackets drifting out to sea before Bowness arrived, but just 11 of their 19 wins had come in regulation. Only Vancouver (10) had fewer. That's bad on two levels.

First, it means the Jackets, even in defeat, were allowing loser points to spread across the standings. Second, it meant that, even with an improbable run, they couldn't count on getting any tiebreakers at the end of the season. Regulation wins are the first tiebreaker to determine season-ending standings.

The Blue Jackets' hot streak, in which nine of the 11 wins have been in regulation, has improved the picture. The Jackets have more regulation wins (20) than Toronto (19), Philadelphia (18) and New Jersey (18), and just two fewer than the New York Islanders.

Third periods

Admit it: you're no longer stricken with panic when Columbus carries a lead into the third period.

The Blue Jackets have had a couple of shaky thirds, but they haven't let any games slip away in almost a month. Moreover, they've played, at times, with a late-game authority that had gone missing earlier in the season.

The numbers are worth noting, too. Under Bowness, the Blue Jackets have outscored opponents 14-7 in the third period. Before that, in 45 games, the Jackets had been outscored 63-39 in third periods.

What can improve?

Deadline boost

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell and his staff, especially vice president of hockey operations Laurence Gilman, will be busy during the break trying to sign pending UFA forwards Boone Jenner, Charlie Coyle, Mason Marchment and defenseman Erik Gudbranson to new contracts.

It would be a massive boost to the dressing room if those deals got done, a proof of commitment to the players on the cusp of what they hope will be a playoff berth and run.

Even if those talks hit a snag, it would be surprising if the Blue Jackets were a lesser team after the March 6 trade deadline. Waddell wants to help this group, which he thinks could be a real threat in the postseason given their size and depth.

If the GM can find an offensive finisher with term, he'd make a move. There could be more moves for depth, too, because that's what a playoff run requires. The move that might send the fan base over to tilt would be the return of former captain Nick Foligno, who figures to be on the move from Chicago.

Systems work

With the NHL's schedule compacted to squeeze in the Olympics, Bowness has had no time to really put his stamp on how he wants the Blue Jackets to play. They've had only three or four true practices, always with a game the following day.

He'll finally get a chance to make his tweaks when the players return from their break with an initial practice on Feb. 18.

They won't practice all eight days between then and their first game back — Feb. 26 versus the Islanders — but there will be time for lengthy practices to go over any neutral-zone or defensive-zone changes he wants to make.

It does beg the question: Is this really the time to tinker?

Eliminating breakdowns

This is hockey. There's no way to completely eliminate grade-A chances against. Still, Bowness sees too many situations, he said, in which opponents are given clean scoring chances and pucks get behind defensemen.

This is a defense-first coach, not dissimilar tactically to previous Columbus coaches Ken Hitchcock and John Tortorella. He has delighted in two of the Blue Jackets games that have been 0-0 after two periods.

On Tuesday in New Jersey, when the Blue Jackets scored three third-period goals and the Devils were the first team to crack, Bowness beamed. However, there were still a few chances for New Jersey that he didn't like.

Clean it up, boys. That's the message.

Get going

The Blue Jackets are averaging almost four goals per game under Bowness, which is plenty enough in today's NHL. Remarkably, the Jackets also have some key players who haven't created much offensively in recent weeks.

Adam Fantilli, Jenner, Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov each have one goal over the last 11 games. Kent Johnson, back in a top-six role under Bowness, has two goals. Even Kirill Marchenko, who has three goals in that span, hasn't been his turbo-charged self yet offensively.

The damage has been done, mostly by Coyle, the third-line center, and, of course, Zach Werenski.

Bowness has had only good things to say about all of the above-mentioned, although he has challenged Voronkov and demoted him to the fourth line. If these guys get going ...

Easy travel

The schedule is going to be intense — the Blue Jackets play 17 games in March — but the worst of their travel is behind them.

The Blue Jackets don't leave the Eastern time zone the rest of the way, and they don't have a road trip longer than three games, either. There are five back-to-backs on the schedule, but they haven't been as bad as last season.

After beating Chicago on Wednesday, the Blue Jackets are 7-3-1 in the back half of a back-to-back. They're 7-2-2 in first games, too.

While 14 of the Blue Jackets' remaining 26 games are at Nationwide Arena, the road hasn't been a nightmare for Columbus this season, either.

The Blue Jackets are 14-12-3 away from home, and they are also on pace for their first winning record on the road since 2019-20.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets blow past Blackhawks, arrive at Olympic break as NHL's hottest club

By Aaron Portzline – February 5, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The entire hockey world is looking forward to the Olympics, especially after a 12-year hiatus by the NHL. Every player in the league can use an in-season three-week break with all of the bumps and bruises from a compacted schedule.

But a small part of the Columbus Blue Jackets, the hottest club in the NHL right now, has to be thinking ... now? This is when we *stop* playing?

The Blue Jackets hit the break with a 4-0 win over the Chicago Blackhawks before a beyond-capacity crowd of 18,575 at Nationwide Arena, their seventh consecutive win and 11th win in 12 games dating to Jan. 11.

The flurry of wins has pushed them into the middle of the Eastern Conference playoff race, a remarkable about-face from where the season was headed before they hired Rick Bowness as coach.

“You can’t predict that, but I definitely felt like we had the team in here to do it,” Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. “We had a lot of home games, and we’re usually a good team at home, but we beat some good teams. We went on the road and took care of business.

“I feel like when we play the way we’ve been playing with the guys we have in this room, it definitely doesn’t surprise me.”

The Blue Jackets have had longer winning streaks — their 16 straight wins during the 2016-17 season is tied for second-longest in NHL history — but they’d never won seven consecutive games in regulation before this streak that was extended on Wednesday.

Goaltender Jet Greaves made 21 saves for his second shutout of the season, just 24 hours after Elvis Merlikins had a 24-save shutout in a 3-0 road win against the New Jersey Devils.

The last time the Blue Jackets had back-to-back shutouts by two different starters was during the 2010-11 season, when Mathieu Garon (at the San Jose Sharks) and Steve Mason (at home against the Nashville Predators) went back-to-back.

When Bowness first walked into Nationwide Arena on Jan. 12, he was stressing better defensive play, penalty killing, etc. The Blue Jackets have responded, and the goaltenders have benefited dramatically.

That’s three shutouts and only 13 goals allowed during the seven consecutive wins.

“Bones really harps on the details (of defending), and the guys have done a good job responding to that and answering the challenge he’s brought to us,” Greaves said. “It’s shown in the performance and the result.

“There are still a lot of areas we can all still get better at, and we’re still learning and trying to work on every day. We still have a lot of work ahead of us for us to grow.”

Werenski, Ivan Provorov, Danton Heinen and Sean Monahan scored goals for the Blue Jackets, who led 3-0 early in the second period and seemed in full control from the start.

“We’re realizing the right way to play,” Bowness. “We’re starting to understand when we can and cannot make plays, so we’re not turning the puck over as much. The structure has been good, but you can give the players a ton of credit, man.

“They’ve been working their butts off. They have. It’s all on them. They just bought it, and I couldn’t be more proud of the guys.”

Werenski’s goal, coming 4:46 into the game, was his 20th of the season. He’s only the 23rd defenseman in NHL history — and the fourth among active players — to have three 20-goal seasons.

A change of plans has Werenski leaving Thursday morning for Milan, where he’ll represent Team USA in the Olympics for the first time. Merlikins will represent Latvia, which happens to play the United States on the first day of the tournament.

Werenski has been pinching himself about this opportunity, repeatedly calling it “the opportunity of a lifetime.” He’d have a blast in Italy no matter what, he said, but the fact that the Blue Jackets have righted their ship will make it easier.

“Just knowing where we’re at, knowing what we’ve accomplished, knowing what we’re building ... we know we’re in a great spot right now and guys should enjoy their break,” Werenski said. “(Elvis and I) can go and enjoy Milan and know we’re in a great spot when we get back here.

“That was our goal when we were slipping a little bit earlier this season, to get back in it by the Olympic break. We’re right there, and we feel really confident right now.”

The win pulled the Blue Jackets to within two points of the New York Islanders for third place in the Metropolitan Division, and to within four points of the Boston Bruins for the second wild-card spot in the East.

On the wax board in the Blue Jackets’ dressing room postgame were written the first two games that await the Blue Jackets when the games resume. The Jackets play on the road against the Boston Bruins on Feb. 26 and at home against the Islanders on Feb. 28. They resume practice on Feb. 18.

“We’re going to have some hard practices, and we’ll get them ready, because we’re coming out of the gate with Boston and Islanders, two teams, I believe, we can catch,” Bowness said. “But there’s a lot of hard work ahead of us when we come back.”

When Bowness first arrived, he tried to puff up the Blue Jackets’ confidence and get them believing that a second-half charge was possible. They’ve been on burner ever since, and now he’s trying to keep them humble amid the 11-1-0 run.

“The reality is, we just got 22 points out of 24, and we still don’t have a playoff spot,” Bowness said. “So we have to keep pushing. We have to keep getting better.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski and his 'puck luck' are ready for the Winter Olympics

By Brian Hedger – February 5, 2026

Grabbing the puck after calling for it, Zach Werenski scooted up the left wing on Feb. 4 at Nationwide Arena early in the first period of the Blue Jackets' 4-0 win.

The Chicago Blackhawks might've felt comfortable in that scenario defending most NHL defensemen, but they knew any comfort was an illusion with the puck on Werenski's stick. That explains why Tyler Bertuzzi's unsuccessful stick check along the wall, a touch late, was delivered with desperation despite having teammates positioned perfectly behind him.

Spencer Knight, the Blackhawks' goalie, closed off the post to that side of the ice. Defensemen Louis Crevier and Alex Vlasic were in good positions to protect the net.

Blue Jackets center Charlie Coyle cut sharply down the slot, between the circles, but Werenski knew that was a dead end. So, using Coyle as a distraction, he launched a shot that looked harmless – until it wasn't. After the goal light flashed, goal horn blared and cannon fired to celebrate the Jackets' 1-0 lead, replays revealed how it happened.

In football, they'd call it a double doink.

In hockey, it's called puck luck, and there's a belief throughout the sport that, good or bad, players and teams earn whatever they get. You "create your own luck," as the NHL proverb goes, and for Werenski, everything's coming up roses with the occasional four-leaf clover.

How did such a harmless-looking play make Werenski the league's first defenseman to score 20 goals this season and first NHL defenseman to reach that number before an Olympic break?

Puck luck. Double doink. Take your pick.

After it was shot, the puck deflected off Crevier's stick. It angled back toward the low slot after zipping between Crevier's skates and then, finally, caromed off Vlasic's right skate into the cage. Knight, who probably saw the whole thing in nightmarish slow motion, looked disgusted.

"I do think there was a stretch there where [Werenski] was probably underrated," Blackhawks coach Jeff Blashill said at the morning skate. "I've thought he's been one of the best defensemen in the league the entire time."

Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski is recognized by fans at Nationwide Arena ahead of his departure for the 2026 Olympics, where he will play for the United States.

That's because Blashill used to coach the Detroit Red Wings and still spends his offseasons in Detroit, near Werenski's hometown of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. He's watched Werenski grow into an elite player

at the collegiate, NHL and international levels, including USA Hockey, headquartered in Plymouth, Michigan.

If there's anybody who knows what the Blue Jackets have with Werenski, and what the U.S. national team will soon get at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milano-Cortina, Italy, it's Blashill, who gushed about last season's runner-up for the Norris Trophy as the NHL's top defenseman.

"I know when you're on the other bench, you always know when he's on the ice, both offensively and defensively," Blashill said. "He's such a good skater that he can play such an attack game because he wins the race back, you know? I get a chance to be around him a little bit because [Red Wings captain] Dylan Larkin and him are good friends, so I've gotten to know him a little bit as a person ... and what a great person, as well."

That's not news to the Blue Jackets or their fans.

After watching Werenski grow from an exciting rookie into the Jackets' top player, he's beloved now as a franchise pillar in Columbus, even though he's still a "Michigan Man," who played collegiately at "That School Up North."

In Columbus, that's quite an accomplishment, and Werenski knows it. He soaked up the round of well-deserved adoration after the Blue Jackets' seventh straight victory, their longest streak since 2017-18. After watching goalie Elvis Merzlikins take a skate with the Latvian flag to start a postgame Olympics send-off, house lights dimmed; Werenski emerged amid roars to unfurl the U.S. flag.

Now, it's off to Italy for one of hockey's brightest stages.

"My first flight's in ... less than 12 hours," Werenski said, pausing to look at a clock inside the Jackets' locker room. "My mind's there. A little travel anxiety, of course, with packing and whatnot, but I'm super excited. I'm just glad that I'm healthy. That's an important part of it. I'm ready to go to Milan and hopefully win gold."

Initially, Werenski wasn't set to arrive until after the opening ceremonies Feb. 6 in Milan. A newly released Netflix documentary about the 1980 U.S. "Miracle on Ice" team changed his plans.

"You see all the footage and hear all those guys talk about the experience," Werenski said. "At first, I thought it was nice to get two days' rest here, but this is once-in-a-lifetime, and I want to be there for it and experience everything I can. I don't want to leave there and have regrets about anything, and I might've regretted not going to opening ceremonies after having the chance."

Somebody make sure his puck luck goes too.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Week Ahead: Schedule & Storylines – Olympic Break Edition

By THW Staff – February 9, 2026

There are no NHL games scheduled for the Columbus Blue Jackets during this period, as the league is on pause for the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina until Feb. 25. Instead of team games, the “Week Ahead” centers entirely on the franchise’s representatives on the world stage and the surprising position the team finds itself in during the break.

The “Bowness Bump” & The Playoff Push

The biggest story in Columbus is the dramatic turnaround under interim head coach Rick Bowness. Entering the Olympic break, the Blue Jackets are one of the hottest teams in the NHL.

They closed out the pre-Olympic schedule on a 7-game winning streak (and an 11-1-0 run), culminating in a shutout win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Feb. 4. This surge has vaulted them back into the playoff conversation in the Metropolitan Division, a scenario that seemed unlikely just a month ago. The break comes at a fascinating time—halting their momentum but also giving them a chance to rest before the final sprint.

The Trade Deadline Dilemma: Buy or Sell?

The team’s unexpected success has complicated the front office’s approach to the upcoming trade deadline (post-Olympics). Previously viewed as likely “sellers” looking to offload pending free agents, the team’s recent performance suggests they may now stand pat or even “buy” to reward the locker room for their playoff push.

Veteran centers Charlie Coyle and Boone Jenner were previously the subject of intense trade rumors. However, with the team winning, trading key roster pieces like Coyle and Jenner becomes a much harder decision for management.

Zach Werenski’s Historic Season

Defenseman Zach Werenski enters the Olympic break playing the best hockey of his career. Before the break, he became the first defenseman in the NHL this season to reach 20 goals.

Olympic Showdown: Teammate vs. Teammate

The highlight of the week occurs on Thursday, Feb. 12, when Team USA faces Team Latvia. This game will feature Blue Jackets teammates facing off: Zach Werenski (USA) will likely be shooting on his own NHL goaltender, Elvis Merzjkins (Latvia).

The Hockey Writers / 3 Things the Blue Jackets Have to Fix to Stay Hot After the Olympic Break

By Wesley Minke – February 9, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets entered the Olympic Break as the hottest team in the league, but they still have work to do if they want to stay hot. Head Coach Rick Bowness talked about how proud he was of his team following a 4-0 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Feb. 4, but he also noted there is a lot still to fix.

The best teams in the league can control the pace of a game. The Blue Jackets have been flying up the ice offensively, but then they get caught in an odd-man rush going the other way because they struggle to keep the puck in the offensive zone. How can the Blue Jackets capitalize on their speed without leaving themselves vulnerable in the defensive zone?

Blue Jackets Must Maintain Possession on Zone Entries

The odd-man rush has been among the Blue Jackets' best offensive weapons this season, but they have also had many attempts entering the offensive zone that look jumbled, confused, and ineffective. Those entries end with a dump-in, a line change, and a wasted opportunity for sustained zone time. The Blue Jackets need to find a way to sustain pressure and not let it come in waves.

According to NHL EDGE IQ, the Blue Jackets rank in the top 10 in 22-plus mph speed bursts, with 71, and 20-plus mph speed bursts, with 1,147, at the time of their coaching change on Jan 12. The biggest benefactor of those speed rushes has been Kirill Marchenko, who has 11 goals off the rush, which ranks second in the NHL behind only Connor McDavid.

According to HockeyStats.com, the Blue Jackets rank towards the middle of the league in goal differential above expected, and a major piece of this has been their defensive resurgence. The offensive chances and expected goals have been consistent all season, but the defense needs to remain structured, as it has under Bowness.

The "Bowness Bump", where the Blue Jackets have found a very effective and productive defensive structure under Bowness, led to back-to-back shutout wins heading into the Olympic Break. If the team can continue to produce offensively while maintaining possession in the offensive zone and limiting chances defensively, as they have done lately, they will be able to control the pace of the game much more.

Blue Jackets' Top Line Must Produce

The Blue Jackets have also seen a boost in offensive productivity under Bowness, but not from the team's top line. The group of Marchenko, Mason Marchment, and Adam Fantilli has not been producing at the level expected of them.

They have been doing a lot of good things on the ice, controlling play, forcing the opposition to spend a lot of time in their own zone, and getting high-danger chances in the offensive zone. The scoring will come if the pressure continues, but the Blue Jackets need these three players to lead the team in production if they want to continue this hot streak after the break.

Marchment started the season red hot, but has since cooled off. He and Marchenko must find a way to keep peppering the net, and hopefully set off the cannon a few more times. Fantilli has struggled to find the back of the net recently. He has just one goal (and 13 assists) in his last 23 games. He has also rung more than a few posts, which shows just how close he is to scoring.

The Blue Jackets will need their offensive motor to continue after the Olympic break, as they return with games against the Boston Bruins and New York Islanders – two teams ahead of them in the standings, and currently in a playoff spot.

Blue Jackets' Defense Has to Tighten Shot Angles

The Blue Jackets' goaltending tandem of Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves looked unbeatable heading into the break. However, they have been forced into making incredible saves because of defensive breakdowns in front of them.

In fairness, the team has seen a considerable improvement on defence, and has taken away many offensive opportunities from their opponents to help out their goaltenders. Cleaner looks for Greaves and Merzlikins will allow them to shut down opponents more effectively down the stretch.

While Merzlikins has started one more game than Greaves under Bowness, both have been incredible. Merzlikins has a 5-1-0 record, with a .925 save percentage, a 2.03 goals-against average (GAA) and one shutout. Greaves has a perfect 5-0-0 record, with a .924 save percentage, and 2.12 GAA and two shutouts.

Bowness has been pleased with both players, noting, "We have a lot of back-to-backs coming up, and we will need both of these guys a lot down the stretch."

So far, the shared goaltending duties have worked to perfection. Now the Blue Jackets just need the defense to keep stepping up in front of them to help them excel and shut down games.

The Blue Jackets' first game back is on Feb. 26 in Boston, before coming home on Feb. 28 to face the Islanders at Nationwide Arena

The Hockey Writers / 3 Key Blue Jackets' Lessons Learned so Far in 2025-26

By Mark Scheig – February 9, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets were the hottest team in the NHL when the season reached the Olympic break. They're on an 11-1-0 run including 10-1 under new head coach Rick Bowness.

Yet, the Blue Jackets are the first team out of the playoffs in the Eastern Conference. While they have games in hand, they trail both third in the Metro and the second wildcard by four points.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? The Blue Jackets ended last season on a heater that saw them finish as the first team out in the East. Going 11-1-0 to be in this position illustrates just how much the team underperformed earlier in the season. It also illustrates just how many teams have played well ahead of them.

How many people honestly saw the Pittsburgh Penguins and New York Islanders holding down the second and third spots in the Metro at the Olympic break? Come on, now.

How many people honestly saw the Buffalo Sabres and Boston Bruins holding down the two wildcard spots at the Olympic break? Again, come on, now. Five teams, the Panthers, Capitals, Senators, Maple Leafs and Devils would all be outside the playoff picture if they started today.

The Blue Jackets will have 26 games to make their final case to see if they can qualify for the playoffs. They are essentially a coin flip to make it in after being in last place in the conference earlier in the season.

With the Olympic break in full swing, we will spend today looking back at three key lessons we learned about the Blue Jackets so far in 2025-26. The first lesson is the primary catalyst behind this 11-1-0 run the team is currently on.

Blue Jackets Are At Their Best When...

Former head coach Dean Evason did some good things in his time with the Blue Jackets. The one thing he was never able to figure out was their team defense and goaltending.

At the time Evason was fired, the Blue Jackets were among the worst teams in the NHL in goals against and shots against. GM Don Waddell told the Hockey Writers at midseason that the team had to depend on outscoring their opponents.

In 2025-26, goal scoring dipped compared to last season. That was a recipe for disaster. The Blue Jackets' average goal scoring dropped a half goal per game while their defense got slightly worse. Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins could only do so much. For part of the season, the team had no confidence in playing Merzlikins.

Enter Rick Bowness. We've talked at length about his impact and how it's more than just a coaching bump. But in a small sample size of 11 games, you cannot ignore just how much better defensively the Blue Jackets are.

The Blue Jackets have allowed 24 goals in their 11 games under Bowness. That's 2.18 goals against per game. To give you an idea of how good this is, the Colorado Avalanche are the top defensive team in the NHL this season allowing 2.42 goals per game. It's been impressive to watch.

Both goaltenders are benefiting from the extra emphasis by the team to limit high-danger chances while being much more aggressive in challenging plays. The Blue Jackets are still in the midst of fully learning Bowness' structure. While a duplicate 11-1-0 run isn't reasonable to expect, better defensive numbers and a good record are reasonable to expect.

The Blue Jackets are showing they are at their best when they focus on defense and goaltending first. Merzlikins and Greaves each recorded a shutout before the Olympic break. That was just the second time in franchise history the team recorded shutouts on consecutive days with different goalies.

The offense has been there of late too averaging just under four goals per game since Bowness took over. The lesson we've learned is that if the Blue Jackets make defense their focus instead of their goal scoring, they're better positioned for success.

Bowness said it when he was introduced as head coach. Teams don't score their way into the playoffs. They defend their way into the playoffs. In the early going, the Blue Jackets have defended much better and have the results to back that up.

Zach Werenski & the Norris Trophy

One of the big questions coming into the 2025-26 season was could Zach Werenski duplicate his Norris-finalist season? Not only is he doing that, he's making a compelling case to be the front runner.

Most voters will still have Cale Makar first on their ballots given his impact on the Avalanche. But Werenski is making a charge thanks to his impact all over the ice.

Werenski has more 5-on-5 goals (16) and 5-on-5 points (36) than anyone in the NHL. He's one of two players with 20 goals as a defenseman. He's second to Edmonton's Evan Bouchard in points 63-62. Werenski has played in six less games than Bouchard.

Werenski should be in every Norris discussion. But he should also see some action for the Hart Trophy especially if the Blue Jackets make the playoffs.

Defensemen usually don't lead their teams in scoring. Werenski leads the Blue Jackets in goals, assists and points. The next closest player is Kirill Marchenko, who is 16 points behind Werenski. The player in third place, Charlie Coyle, trails by 20 points.

If Werenski can get to 30 goals and 90 points, there will be a fascinating debate about his Norris candidacy given how highly Makar is thought of.

Zach Werenski is primed to be in the thick of the Norris Trophy discussion again in 2025-26. (Timothy T. Ludwig-Imagn Images)

The lesson learned is that to some, Werenski continues to somehow be undervalued in the league. Maybe it's the smaller market of Columbus. But the players who play against him and the coaches who coach against him all know. He's one of the best players in the world at his position.

Werenski has a real shot at the Norris this season even if his Blue Jackets' fall short of the playoffs. He's been that impressive.

Blue Jackets' Goal This Season Was Always Playoffs

There has been some question as to how the Blue Jackets might handle the upcoming trade deadline. There is no debate especially in light of their 11-1 run.

This season has always been about making the playoffs for the Blue Jackets. Their moves prove that.

The Blue Jackets all said they thought they were good enough to be a playoff team in 2025-26. Management echoed that same feeling. Falling just short last season gave them hope they could get over the hump this season.

Waddell's moves have all signaled that there hasn't been any question about their stance. It hasn't changed.

The Blue Jackets acquired Mason Marchment from the Seattle Kraken. That happened when the team was much further down the standings.

The Blue Jackets were the first team to make a coaching change. The move happened when the team still had enough time to make a comeback in the standings.

Now only four points out of the playoffs, it would be wild to think the Blue Jackets would change course and sell now. While they have a bevy of pending unrestricted free agents to make decisions on including Coyle, Marchment, Boone Jenner and Erik Gudbranson, Waddell said he was going to use the Olympic break to see where these situations stood.

The Blue Jackets would have to be completely blown away by an offer to part with any of these players now. Given how close they are in the playoff race with games in hand, expect them to buy if and when the right opportunity comes up.

The Blue Jackets haven't tasted the playoffs since the Toronto bubble. There is a desire to break that trend. Selling now after their earlier moves simply doesn't make sense unless someone vastly overpays.

The lesson here is that we should expect the Blue Jackets to give it their best shot to qualify for the playoffs. By their own words, missing them would be a failure by everyone involved.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Players on USA's Men's Team to Watch at the 2026 Winter Olympics

By Mariah E. Stark - February 6, 2026

The 2026 Winter Olympics are officially underway, but the men's hockey has yet to start, their first games will start next week, Wednesday, Feb. 11. The last time the NHL took part in the Olympics was 2014 so many of these players have been waiting a long time to get the chance to represent their countries once again or for the first time.

Team USA's roster has been criticized ever since it was released back in January, but they have a lineup full of talented players. Of course, with every roster, there have been names left off that surprised some, and some picked that were even more of a shock. In this article, we'll look at a few players, fans should keep an eye on, starting with their defense.

Werenski Shines Bright

Zach Werenski has really made a name for himself the last couple of seasons as he's led the Columbus Blue Jackets in points the last two seasons. He's been through a lot over the past couple of seasons, but he's found a way to persevere. He's not only one of the best on the Blue Jackets but also in the NHL, as many have taken notice, including Team USA's general manager Bill Guerin.

In 52 games played this season, he's put up 62 points as a defenseman, and the season prior, he played 81 games and produced 82 points. He contributes a lot offensively, but he doesn't let his defense lack either, as he has 65 blocked shots this season. USA will need both sides of his game if they want to compete for the gold medal.

This will be Werenski's first Olympics, and he'll be looking to make everyone proud. He was on a seven-game point streak before the break, and hopefully, he'll be able to bring both that scoring side and defensive abilities with him as USA will need all of it to get past the tough competition.

Boldy's Thriving

While Matt Boldy is a member of the Minnesota Wild, the team Bill Guerin is also a general manager of, he earned his spot with his play from not only this season but last season as well. He's continuously found ways to improve his game for the Wild in offense, defense, and physicality. He's easily one of the Wild's most valuable players, and he could become that for USA as well.

He's had at least 60 points in the past four seasons, including 73 points in 82 games played last season, and this season he's pushing for 50 goals. Boldy has 32 goals and 30 assists for 62 points so far this season in 54 games played. 19 of those points have been on the power play, and it's likely he'll get a chance on Team USA's power play, especially with the shot he has. Like Werenski, he's heading into the Olympics on a seven-game point streak.

Boldy has shown his speed and puck-handling skills a lot more this season, and his confidence has grown a lot in a short time. He's more willing to carry the puck and control the play, which is exactly what USA needs, and fans will want to keep an eye on him because that's when the magic happens.

Oettinger Fun to Watch

Team USA is lucky enough to have three strong goaltenders, and all three will likely see time in the net, but Jake Oettinger definitely stands out from the other two. He's the Dallas Stars' starting goaltender, and he has kept them near the top of the standings for the majority of the season. He's a capable goaltender who's had a winning record basically since he started back in the 2020-2021 season.

This season, he has a record of 23-10-4, and he's made 971 saves in 37 games played. He has a strong team in front of him, but he's stepped up when they needed him the most, and he's a major reason the Stars have been so successful. He's even jumped into the offense a bit, as he has an assist, plus he's recorded two shutouts.

He's consistently playing against the top in the league, and now some of those players are his teammates, while some he'll have to make stops against. Team USA has a lot of firepower on their roster, but they'll need someone strong between the pipes to keep out all the other strong shots coming their way. Hopefully, Oettinger can bring some of that to USA and help them pursue gold.

It'll be interesting to see how all of Team USA gets along, as some of the roster have been changed since the 4 Nations Face-Off last season, and obviously, it's quite a bit different since the last Olympics with the NHL. Hopefully, everyone comes back healthy, and they can continue to send NHL players in future Olympics.

Team USA Hockey / An Unforgettable Experience

By Justin Felisko – February 7, 2026

MILAN – Charlie McAvoy was with Jeremy Swayman, Jake Oettinger and Zach Werenski at the tail end of the Team USA delegation in the entrance tunnels to the floor of San Siro Stadium on Friday night when the murmur of the crowd began to grow.

McAvoy and his fellow teammates on the U.S. Olympic Men’s Ice Hockey Team were about to walk out in front of the 79,000 people in attendance for the Opening Ceremony of the 2026 Olympic Winter Games in their Ralph Lauren ensemble attire with the rest of the Team USA, including the U.S. Olympic Women’s Ice Hockey Team, when he something louder coming from the front.

“O say, can you seeee!” someone started to sing.

Within seconds, McAvoy and many of the USA delegation of athletes were belting the national anthem of the United States just as they marched into the raucous century old soccer stadium for the 2026 Olympic Opening Ceremony.

“We’re all singing the national anthem as we’re about to go out and it just gave me chills,” McAvoy said on Saturday morning during a tour of the Starbucks Winter House. “Like I’m getting chills now.”

This was the kind of moment McAvoy figured he did not want to miss when he learned he would be representing his country at the Olympics, especially when he found out in December that his Boston Bruins teammate David Pastrnak was making preparations to get to Milan in time to be a potential flag bearer for Czechia.

Therefore, McAvoy, as well as Oettinger, Swayman and Werenski, worked on finding their way to Milan instead of flying over to Italy with majority of NHL players on Saturday.

“I got a video sent to me from my family and you can just see the smile I have on my face,” McAvoy said. “I was pretty starstruck looking up and seeing all the lights and everything. I’ll never forget that moment. You can’t replace it. It was just once in a lifetime, really is how I feel.”

It was a full circle moment for the Long Beach, New York, native who would watch the Opening Ceremony for both the Summer and Winter Olympics with his family as a youth hockey player.

“You see that moment where the athletes walk in and everybody’s waving,” McAvoy said. “I mean the pride I felt just watching TV and now I get to be a part of it. It was a moment where I just kind of was like, ‘Will I ever regret going to this or will I regret if I didn’t?’”

Zach Werenski has always been a huge proponent for representing his country on the international stage, and he helped the U.S. Men’s National Team win its first IIHF World Championship in 92 years last spring.

However, the Opening Ceremony was certainly a level up when you involve the best athletes in the world from various sports and more than 90 countries. The 2026 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony was spread out to various locations of the Milano Cortina Games, including ceremonies in Livigno and Predazzo.

“The pride I felt last night at the Olympic Ceremony is something I may never feel again,” Werenski said. “All of the countries here behind their flag with their teammates and fellow countrymen. It is an incredible experience. I’ve always felt that pride playing for Team USA, but last night on that stage, something I have always dreamed out, it definitely hit home even harder.”

Oettinger said he owed it to McAvoy for even becoming aware he could try and make it to Milan in time for Opening Ceremony.

The 27-year-old said the grand scope of Opening Ceremony sunk in as the U.S. athlete delegation walked across the stage and he looked up at the four giant gold Olympic Rings hanging high above the stadium floor that had come together during a theatrical opening earlier in the evening.

“When you walk out to see huge Olympic rings in gold and stuff, I watched the opening ceremonies growing up and stuff, so I was just like, ‘How did I get here? What am I doing here?’ Just so cool and I will never forget that,” Oettinger said.

Swayman, who is rooming with Oettinger in the Olympic Village called it “surreal.”

“Walking in with your whole country and having that pride,” Swayman said. “It was a pinch-yourself moment and pretty special to share that with those guys.”

After landing just before 7 a.m. on Friday at Milano Malpensa Airport, the four NHL players went through an abbreviated Team USA Welcome Experience and eventually made their way to the Olympic Village.

There they got a chance to interact and mingle with other athletes, including members from U.S. Figure Skating.

“I met the Quad god. I didn’t even know his name at first,” Oettinger said in laughter referencing U.S. Figure skating icon Ilia Malinin. “I heard he is unbelievable, and I really want to go see him.”

Swayman explained it has been a whirlwind flying to Italy and meeting so many athletes in only 24 hours so far.

“Obviously we got to connect with all the women’s hockey players and it was really awesome,” Swayman said. “Then basically the entire U.S. Speedskating Team, figure skaters. It was just an overwhelming experience of happiness.”

The rest of the U.S. Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey Team lands on Sunday morning and the group will hit the ice for the team’s first practice later in the evening.

“The foundation is in place,” McAvoy said. “4 Nations provided us with that. Then getting together in the summer (at the U.S. Olympic Men’s Orientation Camp) added another pillar, to that. When everybody gets here tomorrow, we're just going to be ready to go. We're going to be ready to practice.”