



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
October 15-16, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets

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The Columbus Dispatch / Thank you, Gaudreau family, for sharing Johnny Hockey with the hockey world

By Michael Arace – October 16, 2024

A slideshow ran in a loop as a crowd of mourner-celebrants filed into Nationwide Arena Tuesday night. It was an album of the life of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother. May they rest in peace.

Those among the millions who were touched by Gaudreau's life and poleaxed by his death have seen all or parts of the slideshow. Maybe, they saw it at the candlelight vigil that was held in Columbus, or the one that was held in Calgary, or the one that was held at Gloucester Catholic High in New Jersey. Maybe, they saw it during television coverage of the Sept. 9 funeral for the Gaudreau boys in Media, Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia suburb.

Gaudreau and his brother were killed on Aug. 29 while riding bicycles on a rural road near where they grew up in South Jersey. They were struck from behind by a suspected drunk driver. Their sister was to be married the next day, and they were in the wedding party. Both of their wives are pregnant.

Gaudreau was a star hockey player – a seven-time NHL All-Star with the Calgary Flames and the Blue Jackets, with a points-per-game average (.974) that is Hall-of-Fame caliber – but the slideshow portrays him as he truly was. It's a reel of hockey photos from peewee through Boston College and onward to Columbus, via Calgary. There's so much celebrating. There's so much smiling, so much laughter, so much joy.

It both sears and cauterizes the soul to watch the slideshow. To watch is to feel loss and understand happiness. Everybody loved Johnny. Everybody. And he loved them right back.

Thursday, before the Blue Jackets' season opener in Minnesota, coach Dean Evason was asked about how he and the team were handling the emotions of moving on without Gaudreau. The first of many Gaudreau tributes was staged prior to the Jackets-Wild game that night.

"We've talked to our group constantly and we will continue to talk through all of this, because every team is going to do something special for Johnny and Matthew – and we're going to embrace it," Evason said. "We're going to use that. It's not going to be a case of, 'Oh, we're doing another one?' Of course we are. We're honoring their lives and what they did not only as hockey people but as human beings. And our guys have done a fantastic job of honoring Johnny and keeping him with us. His spirit, his love of the game, we're taking that with us into this first game and throughout the entire season. And, obviously (beyond)."

The big one was Tuesday night. It was the home opener. The Florida Panthers, defending Stanley Cup champions, were in town. The long-planned and highly anticipated Gaudreau tribute was to be presented just prior to puck-drop. I know folks who don't get to a lot of games, but they love the team and they had to be inside Nationwide for this one. They wanted to mourn and celebrate in this community.

It started with a video, and more pictures. Johnny on the ice at 2 days old, cradled in his father Guy's arms. Johnny as a virtual tot, scoring on a wraparound. Johnny as a Boston College star, winning the Hobey Baker Award, the Heisman of hockey. It was like the slideshow – with shots and/or video of Johnny and his wife, Meredith, on the Jersey shore, at their wedding, in a car holding the ultrasound from her first pregnancy, highlights from Calgary, Johnny being introduced after signing with the Jackets.

Beautifully, poignantly, it was narrated by Gaudreau, using clips from interviews and in-house promotional films.

Gaudreau's last line: "I think when all is said and done, I just want to be remembered as a guy that just wanted to be around the rink, around friends, around family."

The Gaudreau family, in a luxury suite, then appeared on the Jumbotron. The Jackets and Panthers lined up on either side of a carpet that led to center ice. Out walked Meredith Gaudreau, with son, Johnny Jr., 8 months, in her arms. Behind them was her brother, Eddie Morris, holding her daughter, Noa, 2. When they reached mid-ice, Meredith was handed little Johnny to Jackets center Sean Monahan, who followed his best friend to Columbus in free agency last summer, fewer than two months before Gaudreau was killed.

A banner rose to the rafters. It read, "Johnny Gaudreau, 1993-2024," with a white No. 13 inside a blue circle, surrounded by a white field.

The crowd roared. Meredith waved, then wiped a tear from her eye.

The P.A. announcer came on and said, "Thanks to the entire Gaudreau family for sharing Johnny with us."

Then, another video: Meredith thanked the 5th line, as Jackets' fans are known, for all of their support.

She said, "I don't want anyone to be sad."

She asked the crowd to emulate her late husband.

"Love your family first and foremost, and when it's time to drop the puck, let's love the game that Johnny loved," she said. "Thank you. And go Jackets."

The Blue Jackets took the opening faceoff with four skaters on the ice – a tribute to their absent left wing.

The crowd of stood for an ovation and chanted, "John-ny Hock-ey."

So many of us have struggled to balance the scope of the tragedy, which is unquantifiable, while attempting to find a way forward. Tuesday night, 18,484 members of the human race gathered and, on some level, hoped for an answer. The eyes of the North American hockey community were on Columbus.

A helping hand was given. It was given by a coach and a team that has been deeply hurt, but understand honor. It was given by Derek Dawley and the team's event presentation department, and whoever write the line, "Thanks for the entire Gaudreau family for sharing Johnny."

Mostly, it was given by Meredith Gaudreau, a widow with a toddler, an infant and a third child growing within her. We needed this paragon of strength, gentleness and humanity.

The Columbus Dispatch / There's a new banner in the rafters at Nationwide Arena.

By Brian Hedger – October 16, 2024

During a pregame ceremony honoring the life of Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed Aug. 29 along with his brother Matthew, the Blue Jackets hoisted a white banner bearing his No. 13, while his widow, Meredith and young kids, Noa and Johnny, watched on the ice.

They stood next to Sean Monahan, one of Gaudreau's best friends and a center who signed with the Blue Jackets on July 1 partly to reunite with Gaudreau. They played together with the Calgary Flames for almost a decade, and planned to live a few houses away from each other in Columbus. Monahan held one of the kids, while Meredith had the other, wiping away tears as the banner lifted into place.

The ceremony was preceded by a touching video of Gaudreau's life and career on the screens above the ice, and Meredith Gaudreau provided a recorded message to fans — known in Columbus as The 5th Line — after the ceremony, urging them to cheer for the Blue Jackets rather than be filled with grief.

"I don't want anyone to be sad," she said. "I want everyone to be inspired by the life that John lived. That is love your family, first and foremost, and when it's time to drop the puck, let's love the game that John loved."

More members of Gaudreau's family, including parents Guy and Jane, plus members of Meredith's family watched from a private box, which was shown prior to the banner raising. Both teams, after wearing No. 13 jerseys in warmups on each side of the ice, lined a blue carpet for Meredith and the Gaudreau children to walk.

On their way back to the bench, they received hugs from players on both teams, along with the clacking of sticks tapping the ice in salute. The Blue Jackets and Panthers players also honored Gaudreau by having Monahan win the opening faceoff, without a left wing where Gauread played on the top line. Monahan sent the puck to the spot where Gaudreau would've been and the game clock burned off 13 seconds while players from both teams stood still.

The puck from that draw was scooped up and sent to the Jackets' bench for safekeeping, and a second opening draw with two full teams started the game. A couple of times, a smattering of "Johnny Hockey!" chants broke out, but a somber feeling hung in in the building as the game began, steadily lifting as play continued.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets fall one goal short after Gaudreau memorial: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – October 16, 2024

It felt like the equalizer was moments away.

After seeing Blue Jackets forward James van Riemsdyk redirect Damon Severson's shot into the Florida Panthers' net while his own net was empty, the energy at sold-out Nationwide Arena skyrocketed Tuesday night. It pulled the Jackets within 4-3 of the defending Stanley Cup champions on the night Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau were remembered during an emotional ceremony — including Johnny's No. 13 sent to the rafters — but the tying goal didn't happen.

Spencer Knight, the Panthers' goalie, stopped everything the Jackets threw at him in the final two-plus minutes. Florida left with the victory, and the Jackets fell one goal short for the second time in their first three games.

"(The Gaudreau tribute) was very well done by the Blue Jackets, and the Blue Jackets players played their butts off tonight," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said. "So did we. Our goaltender was the key piece tonight, and we needed him to be."

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets, Florida Panthers honor Gaudreau on faceoff

It was one of those moments that instantly became historic for the Blue Jackets, who took the game's opening faceoff without Gaudreau's spot at left wing filled.

They had four skaters and goalie Elvis Merzlikins lined up against the Panthers' five plus Knight. As soon as the puck hit the ice, it became apparent what was happening. Players for each team froze for 13 seconds, until 19:47 was left. The puck was scooped up by an official right where Gaudreau would have been standing, and it was delivered to the Blue Jackets' bench.

A new opening draw followed, and that's how this game started. It was a humbling reminder of what the Blue Jackets and the entire sport have lost in both Gaudreau brothers. "It's hard, to be honest," Jackets center Sean Monahan said. "It was a special moment that, uh, I'll remember forever."

Sean Monahan's goal another tribute to close friend Johnny Gaudreau

It lasted only 37 seconds, but Monahan's goal briefly gave the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead at 11:22 of the second and it felt like a divine tally with Gaudreau's assistance. After his first attempt was stopped, Monahan charged after the rebound and basically willed the puck past Knight.

It was his second goal in as many games, second of the season and one of the most meaningful of his career.

"I felt like Johnny was watching down on us today," Monahan said. "I had a feeling I was going to get one. Fortunately enough I did, and we lost, which sucks, but I could definitely feel John today."

Columbus Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson shows skill on short-handed goal

It's a good thing Evason and his coaching staff gave Kent Johnson a look as a penalty-killing forward in training camp. The right wing is not only a disruptive force while short-handed, but he's also an offensive threat.

It was only a matter of time before he created a short-handed goal, and it led to Cole Sillinger scoring the game's first goal 41 seconds into the second period. Spotting Sillinger breaking free in the neutral zone, Johnson sent a perfect backhand stretch pass from his own blue line to hit his target in stride for a breakaway.

Sillinger buried the shot for his first goal of the season, completing another big play between the two as further evidence of their growing chemistry.

"I really enjoy playing with him," Sillinger said. "We're opposites, in a way, but we're starting to think the game more and more alike and using each other more. We're just wanting it more for each other and believing in each other more. That's a big part of it. As long as we keep playing together, our chemistry is just going to keep building."

Columbus Blue Jackets' resilience persists in loss to Florida Panthers

It's only three games into an 82-game slate, but Evason is already learning something about the Blue Jackets. Even when they're down, they push to the end. This time, after falling behind 4-2 on Eetu Luostarinen's goal with 4:48 left, the Jackets pulled back within a goal on James van Riemsdyk's goal with 2:39 left and Merzlikins on the bench for an extra skater.

It's the second time in their first three games the Blue Jackets have cut a two-goal margin to one in the waning minutes of a third period, after doing the same in a 3-2 loss to open the season Thursday at Minnesota.

"This team won't quit," Evason said. "I know that for a fact. They won't let each other quit. That's what we've seen, that's what they've built in a short period. They push each other. At no time in the three games did we sag, and there were opportunities for us to have a letdown. There are signs that there's no quit in this group, for sure."

Gudbranson may be next Columbus Blue Jackets regular out long term

Another day arrived, and another injury happened to a Blue Jackets player. After already losing captain Boone Jenner and Dmitry Voronkov in the preseason, just 14 hours apart, the Jackets are now looking at a possible long-term stretch without defenseman Erik Gudbranson, another key locker room leader along with their on-ice sheriff of sorts.

This time, it was a collision between teammates that did it. Gudbranson and Monahan collided late in the second period behind a play and both fell to the ice. Gudbranson immediately reacted to an apparent injury, slowly getting to his feet and leaving the ice while holding his right arm or wrist.

Evason didn't have specifics on the injury following the game, but said the initial prognosis "doesn't look good."

When an NHL coach says that after a game, it almost always means multiple weeks out of the lineup as the best-case scenario. If so, that would be another big loss for a young team that leans heavily on Gudbranson's leadership, experience, savvy and toughness.

Assuming he'll miss time, it's likely David Jiricek's time to step into a regular role as Gudbranson's replacement. He's big, right-handed and was drafted sixth overall in 2022 by the Blue Jackets for a reason.

The Columbus Dispatch / Replay: Columbus Blue Jackets vs Florida Panthers: Updates, highlights, Gaudreau ceremony

By Brian Hedger – October 16, 2024

The Blue Jackets (1-2-0) fell to the Panthers (3-2-0) in a back-and-forth affair at Nationwide Arena.

Both clubs scored in the third period with James Van Riemsdyk hitting the net for Columbus and Eetu Luostarinen giving Florida the game-winner.

It was an especially eventful second period. The Blue Jackets opened the scoring, but every time they landed a blow, Florida counter-punched, before eventually taking the lead.

Cole Sillinger's tally was negated by Anton Lundell's goal. Columbus' Sean Monahan scored, only for the Blue Jackets to see things evened up again less than a minute later with Sam Reinhart scoring the first of his two goals. Reinhart then gave Florida their first advantage at the 19:58 mark of the second period. He had four points on the night as he also registered two assists.

Both teams played a bit of a flat, scoreless first period, which is somewhat understandable given the emotionally taxing ceremony that preceded it.

It was the Jackets' home opener, and in lieu of the usual festivities, which are going to take place Thursday when Columbus hosts the Buffalo Sabres, the organization remembered late Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau.

Gaudreau and his brother were bicycling near their hometown in Salem, New Jersey, on Aug. 29 when they were struck and killed by a Jeep Cherokee. The vehicle's driver, 43-year-old Sean Higgins, faces multiple criminal charges.

His family, including his parents and wife, were present among the 18,484 fans watching the game. Meredith, Johnny Gaudreau's widow, was on the ice as the team raised a banner in her late husband's honor.

Next up for Columbus is the aforementioned home game Thursday against the Sabres.

The Blue Jackets are still defenseman Erik Gudbranson's status after he left the game late in the second period following a collision with Monahan in the neutral zone. Head coach Dean Evason didn't provide specifics following the game, but the initial prognosis on an upper-body injury "doesn't look good."

Blue Jackets vs Panthers score

| TEAMS | 1 | 2 | 3 | T |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|
| Panthers | 0 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Blue Jackets | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 |

Blue Jackets, Panthers final score:

The Blue Jackets record drops to 1-2-0 and the Panthers improve to 3-2-0 after Florida's 4-3 win at Nationwide Arena. Columbus' next game is Thursday at home against the Buffalo Sabres.

Panthers 4, Blue Jackets 3

2:39 remaining, third period: Damon Severson sent a centering pass to James Van Riemsdyk after the savvy veteran slipped into some unattended real estate in front of the Panthers' net.

It is Van Riemsdyk's first regular-season goal as a Jacket.

Also, the Blue Jackets have not done away with the chili chant.

Panthers 4, Blue Jackets 2

4:48 remaining, third period: Sam Reinhart has four points tonight: two assists, one coming on the insurance goal just scored by Eetu Luostarinen, to go along with two goals.

The tenor of tonight's game has changed

5:31 remaining, third period: With the officials swallowing their whistles, play has gotten more physical. Blue Jackets fans have been frustrated with some of the non-calls, and also perhaps sensing the approach of the end of tonight's game has gotten a bit louder.

Giving them an additional reason to cheer, the Blue Jackets have announced they have raised more than \$250,000 for the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation.

Sellout crowd on hand for tonight's Blue Jackets game

The attendance this evening is 18,484 at Nationwide Arena.

Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson out

The Blue Jackets have just announced that defenseman Erik Gudbranson will not return due to an upper-body injury.

Where is Florida Panthers goalie Sergei Bobrovsky?

Former Blue Jackets netminder Sergei Bobrovsky is at Nationwide Arena tonight. He's just not in net for Florida, who chose to give Spencer Knight some ice time instead.

The Jackets played the theme to "Welcome Back Kotter" during the second period and panned their cameras to Bobrovsky, who received a quiet, but warm, round of applause.

Panthers 3, Blue Jackets 2

0:02 remaining, second period: With an almost literal last-second shot, the Panthers took their first lead of the night. Sam Reinhart scored his second of the evening.

Blue Jackets Gudbranson leaves ice with apparent upper-body injury

1:32 remaining, second period: Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson collided with forward Sean Monahan behind the play and crashed hard to the ice. He was holding his arm as he left, but Gudbranson isn't one who heads down the tunnel for minor aches and pains.

Blue Jackets 2, Panthers 2

8:01 remaining, second period: The back and forth is continuing. Sam Reinhart tipped in a shot to tie things up again at Nationwide Arena.

Blue Jackets 2, Panthers 1

8:38 remaining, second period: Sean Monahan followed up on his own shot to score for Columbus. Assists went to Yegor Chinakov and Kirill Marchenko.

Blue Jackets 1, Panthers 1

9:35 remaining, second period: Anton Lundell has evened things up with a wrister from about 20 feet out.

Blue Jackets 1, Panthers 0

19:19 remaining, second period: Columbus' Kent Johnson sauced a beautiful pass to Cole Sillinger behind the last line of the Panthers' defense for a breakaway.

The resulting short-handed goal gave the Jackets a 1-0 lead.

Blue Jackets, Panthers reach the end of the first period

0:00 remaining, first period: The Blue Jackets have seven shots on goal to the Panthers eight, a somewhat remarkable number, given that Columbus was called for three penalties and Florida was whistled for none.

The Blue Jackets blocked 10 shots, they won 58.8% of the faceoffs, and had one takeaway. Both teams have registered four hits.

Yegor Chinakov is the only Jackets player to have multiple shots (two) at this point.

Blue Jackets' 50-50 raffle total at \$39,000...and counting

3:52 remaining, first period: There are a number of fans here tonight wearing gray hoodies with Gaudreau's number and "Johnny Hockey" nickname.

They're being sold to benefit the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation, which also received proceeds from the Jackets' usual charity raffle.

The proceeds from tonight's 50-50 raffle are going to the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation, and it was just announced the total for that drawing is at \$39,000.

And that's not all the fundraising the team is doing that will benefit the Gaudreau family charity. Jackets players wore No. 13 jerseys during warmups and those are being auctioned off to bring in even more.

—Bob Vitale

"Please, please, don't drink and drive."

12:53 remaining, first period: During a media timeout, longtime Blue Jackets in-arena announcer Mike Todd introduced an artist who is painting a portrait of Johnny Gaudreau during tonight's game. And then he pleaded with fans to utilize a designated driver if they need one.

With alcohol again on sale this season throughout Nationwide Arena, Todd made an emotional plea.

"If you're drinking tonight," Todd said, "please, please don't drink and drive."

Fans cheered.

According to the police report, the man who struck and killed Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, told officers he had been drinking the evening of the collision. Here's where that legal case stands.

—Bob Vitale

Columbus Blue Jackets make slight lineup change

15:36 remaining, first period: Now segueing to the on-ice portion of tonight's coverage...

Jordan Harris has made his Blue Jackets debut in this home opener against the Florida Panthers, replacing Jack Johnson as Erik Gudbranson's partner on the third defense pairing.

Harris joined the Blue Jackets as the return in the trade that sent Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens in August. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason went back to Elvis Merzlikins in net, after starting Daniil Tarasov in a road win Saturday against the Colorado Avalanche.

The Florida Panthers are playing without power forward Matthew Tkachuk, who didn't make it to Columbus for the game after playing Monday in Buffalo. The reason for his absence was undisclosed, but he was close friends with Johnny Gaudreau and Panthers coach Paul Maurice said Tkachuk, "just couldn't be here."

—Brian Hedger

Blue Jackets take opening faceoff without a left winger

The Columbus Blue Jackets sent four skaters out to start the game, purposely omitting to ice a starting left winger, an obvious homage to Johnny Gaudreau, who played that position here.

Once the puck dropped, officials collected it and handed it to the Blue Jackets bench. Fans gave the moment a standing ovation. Even linesman Jesse Marquis was seen applauding.

"Johnny Hockey" chant breaks out

At the end of the ceremony and before the Leo Welch-performed national anthem, Blue Jackets fans started chanting "Johnny Hockey."

At that point, Johnny Gaudreau's widow, Meredith, appeared on the video board.

"I don't want anybody to be sad," Meredith Gaudreau said, exhorting fans and players to be inspired by Johnny Gaudreau's memory instead.

Another Johnny Gaudreau video tribute and banner-raising

The Blue Jackets have dimmed the house lights. Players from both the Columbus Blue Jackets and Florida Panthers came out on the ice and watched video of Johnny Gaudreau discussing how much he loved hockey.

"I'll never have a bad day going to the rink," Gaudreau said in the video.

At the end of the video, Gaudreau's family was introduced and the Blue Jackets raised a banner in Gaudreau's memory.

Sam Bennett on Skittles, Purple Gatorade and Raisinless Raisin Bran

Panthers center Sam Bennett, who played with Gaudreau for six years in Calgary, was among a group of Panthers who walked into Nationwide Arena carrying Skittles and bottles of purple Gatorade.

Those were two of Gaudreau's favorite snacks, which were left at memorials outside Nationwide Arena, Scotiabank Saddledome in Calgary and at the crash site in New Jersey, where the brothers were struck and killed by a vehicle while riding bikes.

The idea originated with Matthew Tkachuk, who also played with Bennett and Gaudreau in Calgary. Tkachuk couldn't make it to the game for undisclosed reasons, but released a statement through the Panthers saying Gaudreau would "be my teammate for life."

Bennett was grateful to experience the memorial, even though he knew it would be emotional.

"What their family's gone through, it's unthinkable, and I'm definitely looking forward to going and giving his parents a hug out there," Bennett said of Guy and Jane Gaudreau. "It's an emotional night for the hockey world. It's going to be tough, but I'm glad I can be here and honor his legacy in any way."

Bennett also shared a fun memory of Gaudreau from their time together in Calgary.

“I was just sitting there (at our pregame meal) thinking about tonight,” he said. “I thought about Johnny, because every pregame snack before we’d get on the bus, (we) would usually be two of the last guys on the bus ... and he would always eat Raisin Bran cereal, but he would pick out all the raisins out of his cereal. So, I was just literally sitting there today thinking about him picking out all the raisins out of his Raisin Bran, and it ended up putting a little smile on my face.”

—Brian Hedger

Gaudreau ceremony underway at Nationwide Arena

The Blue Jackets have started their remembrance of late Columbus forward Johnny Gaudreau with a video that is currently playing on the videoboard at Nationwide.

Maurice: ‘I’m glad it’s us here tonight’

Florida Panthers head coach Paul Maurice only knew late forward Johnny Gaudreau as an opposing player with the Calgary Flames and Blue Jackets.

The tragedy that took the lives of Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, in late August still felt like a gut punch to the longtime NHL coach.

“It’s really important for guys like me, because I don’t know the family,” Maurice said. “I don’t know the young (men), but you feel the loss, right? I’ve got two boys. So, you just ... the thought of it terrifies you.”

The Panthers will participate in the Jackets’ pregame memorial to the Gaudreau brothers by wearing No. 13 Gaudreau jerseys in warmups and watching the ceremony from the visitors’ bench.

“How do you appropriately give back?” Maurice said. “How do you play your role in this? And (that’s) healing. You’ll get to see the family tonight and you’ll get the feeling they’re going to be OK. There will be a huge community around them. Hockey’s like that. It is a close-knit group. ... It’s a horrible thing, and when something like this happens, you just need everybody around you to be a part of your lives, and I’m glad it’s us here tonight.”

—Brian Hedger

Freshly baked cookies among new concessions options for Columbus Blue Jackets fans

Some highlights:

Japanese-inspired bento boxes with chicken, beef or veggie meatballs; soba noodle salad or rice; marinated egg, house-made pickles and kohlrabi slaw will be at the Stix cart near Section 102.

Pucks & Clucks, a cart near Section 105, will sell boneless wings with your choice of sauce, vegan nuggets, grilled and fried chicken sandwiches, and a special Hawaiian Burger.

Spirits & Spuds, near Section 104, will offer topped fingerling potatoes and high-end liquor selections.

The Wild Turkey Hat Trick Bar, which opened in 2023 near the arena’s Front Street Entrance at Section 107, will serve Italian-themed food this season and has added grab-n-go beverage station.

On the upper concourse, the Sweet Spot near Section 202 will sell frozen custard, freshly baked cookies, cotton candy and other treats.

Blue Tortilla locations in Sections 121 and 217 will feature a nacho battle all season long. The house CBJ Nachos come topped with beer cheese, fire-roasted corn and cotija cheese; a competing nacho inspired by each opponent's hometown also will be on the menu.

—Bob Vitale

The Columbus Dispatch / Johnny Gaudreau remembered: Blue Jackets fans mourn NHL star at home opener

By Bob Vitale – October 16, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets' home opener Tuesday was much like the first holiday without a loved one.

The rituals were all familiar, the traditions locked in over more than two decades of NHL hockey at Nationwide Arena. Fans in Jackets jerseys and hoodies swarmed in, lined up for burgers and beers, and snatched up new merch. They shouted "Leo!" for National Anthem singer Leo Walsh. They chanted "CBJ! CBJ!" and "Let's go, Jackets! Let's go, Jackets!"

But nothing at all was the same. Many people wore No. 13 Tuesday night as the Jackets started their 41-game home schedule for 2024-25. But No. 13 himself was missing on the ice.

"I'm gutted," Cathy Kaplan said as she fought back tears that she said she has shed often since the death on Aug. 29 of Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew, who were struck and killed by a suspected drunk driver while riding their bicycles near their family's home in New Jersey.

Tuesday was an emotional night for many who lingered near a tribute to the Gaudreau brothers on the arena's lower concourse. Four jerseys — from their days at Boston College, Johnny's time on a U.S. national team and with the Dubuque Fighting Saints — flanked his Jackets' No. 13. More than 100 hockey sticks that had been left outside the arena after the star's death leaned against a window. Signs, hockey pucks and other tributes were on display as well.

"It's not the normal uplifting opening night," said Paula Hammer, who was with her husband and daughter. But it was comforting, she said. "We're all sort of here for Johnny."

There were happy memories, too, though. As Jacob Barker looked over merchandise in a lower-concourse kiosk, he recalled buying a Blue Jackets jersey with Gaudreau's name and number in the summer of 2022 and getting it signed at a preseason meet-and-greet.

Gaudreau's wife, Meredith, was expecting their first child at the time, and when Barker got his moment at the autograph table, he told Gaudreau that he was a new father, too.

"His face lit up," Barker said. "He was a family man."

"It was right over there," he said, gesturing toward the area that now houses the Gaudreau memorial.

One of the biggest cheers during a pregame video tribute to Gaudreau came when the images switched from his time with the Calgary Flames to the day in July 2022 when he got off a private plane in Columbus and put on a Blue Jackets jersey for the first time.

Three years after Jackets goalie Sergei Bobrovsky got off a plane in Miami and leading scorer Artemi Panarin landed in New York, Gaudreau was a top free agent who decided to come to Columbus. And he did it for a reason that earned him a place in the hearts of Jackets fans forever.

He liked it here.

Among the hockey sticks, pucks and posters that are part of the memorial to Gaudreau, a few were inscribed with the same message from fans.

"Thank you for choosing Columbus," they said.

The Columbus Dispatch / Kent Johnson was a Johnny Gaudreau fan before teammate: 'He was a big inspiration'

By Brian Hedger – October 15, 2024

The kid's face is unmistakable.

Peeking out from under a black and red knit hat, a Peruvian helmet style number with ear flaps and long braided strings on each side that, years later, would draw chirps from his NHL teammates, is 12-year-old Kent Johnson. He couldn't look more Canadian if he'd tried.

Stretched back against the glass from the first row at Scotiabank Saddledome during a Calgary Flames warmup in 2014 — British Columbia chill, as usual — is a kid who would develop into the fifth pick of the 2021 NHL draft and a lineup mainstay for the Blue Jackets. In the picture, he looks very young and proud to be wearing his favorite T-shirt in front of Johnny Gaudreau, whose jersey it was modeled after.

On the back was a No. 13 and Gaudreau's last name.

In the photo, another of Johnson's future Blue Jackets teammates, Sean Monahan, is looking in the direction of the camera. It's a remarkable memory for Johnson, who shared it, with sorrow, on social media after Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed Aug. 29 while riding bikes in New Jersey.

At the time it was taken, Johnson was ecstatic about that portrait.

"We were at the Mac's (AAA) Tournament in Calgary for Kent's older brother, Kyle, and the whole team went to a Flames game at the Saddledome," said Jay Johnson, Kent's father. "We had the cheap group tickets way up in the nosebleed section, so far up that you couldn't see the stands across the way."

As the story goes, Kent spent most of that post-Christmas trip alternating between his brother's games and finding pickup games on outdoor rinks that he'd never gotten to experience while growing up in temperate Port Moody, British Columbia. The day of the Flames' game, he asked if his dad could take him early for the warmup, before his brother's team planned to arrive.

The goal was to see "Johnny Hockey," an exciting, undersized, playmaking rookie who had taken the NHL by storm after starring at Boston College. Scores of kids his age, especially those who grew up in Calgary, had the same idea.

"There's a lot of other guys that I studied, too, but I'd watch a lot of him against the (Vancouver) Canucks," Kent Johnson said. "I was obviously a Canucks fan, but there was one playoff series where I was just loving it because Johnny was dominating, and they beat the Canucks. I was like, 'Man, this guy's unreal.'"

Gaudreau was small in comparison to most NHL players. Generously, he was listed at 5 feet 9, 165 pounds. Johnson, who is 6-0, 180, grew up as the smallest player on the ice before he turned 14 and shot up "about three inches a year" over four years.

Before those growth spurts, Johnson firmly believed he'd be Gaudreau's size. It created a chip on his shoulder and fueled his drive.

"Johnny was obviously a great player, but Kent had a real connection to John because he was really small," Jay Johnson said. "He was, by far, the smallest kid on his teams. He was good when he was little, so he made the Bantam AAA team when he was only 90 pounds, when the average kid might've been 120 or 130, and some way bigger. So, he had that connection to Johnny. He just loved how he played hockey, and he told me at some point, 'If Johnny Gaudreau can do it, I can do it, too.'"

Johnson reveled in Gaudreau's NHL success, even when it came at the expense of his beloved Canucks.

“You know how it is with small guys,” Kent Johnson said. “It’s like, ‘Can they do it in the playoffs?’ Obviously, I hated hearing that, and I loved seeing Johnny prove those guys wrong. So, I would study his game a lot. There’s some little things I do now that I feel like I got first from watching him.”

That continued with the Blue Jackets, where Johnson watched Gaudreau closely, looking for anything else he could learn. Gaudreau, meanwhile, watched in disbelief one night as the kid from the University of Michigan pulled off a "Michigan" lacrosse goal against the New York Islanders — making 'Johnny Hockey' giggle like a little kid and Nationwide Arena roar.

As for getting his cherished Gaudreau photo at age 12, it was quite a hike for the Johnsons to get down to ice level at the cavernous Saddledome, which is literally shaped like a saddle.

“We had about 50 seats together, so we were, legitimately, in the top row,” Johnson said, chuckling. “You could hardly see the game, although I do remember Johnny had a sick apple (assist) in that game, and I was pumped. It was just really cool to get down there and see him up close in warmup.”

It was a routine move for Jay Johnson, who has taken those type of pictures for his sons on multiple occasions near other NHL stars. There’s another in his collection where Kent poses in front of Sidney Crosby at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics and Rick Nash can be spotted in the background.

Nash is now the Blue Jackets' director of hockey operations and was part of the team's front office when Johnson was drafted. His famed No. 61 jersey hangs in the rafters.

Meanwhile, the Johnsons' Gaudreau photo became a mind-blowing memory eight years later. Gaudreau signed with the Blue Jackets and became teammates with the baby-faced kid who once owned his T-shirt. Jay Johnson couldn't help but show the photo to Gaudreau's parents once, Guy and Jane, in the Jackets' family and friends room.

They loved it, and Kent loved getting to know their son "like a big brother," for two years.

“He was a big inspiration for me,” Johnson said. “I was a really late grower, always skinny, and really small. I honestly thought I was going to be 5-8, so he was the guy I wanted to be. I wanted to be just like him and play like him, and I still try to play like him in a lot of my play style. So, it’s cool looking back.”

The Blue Jackets’ No. 13 jersey, which belonged to Johnson for one season before he eagerly forked it over, hangs in the Jackets’ locker room in Gaudreau's memory. The driver who caused the Gaudreau brothers' deaths, whose blood-alcohol content was higher than the legal limit, is behind bars while facing two counts of death by auto plus other charges.

Sean Higgins' next court appearance had been scheduled for Tuesday in New Jersey, the same day the Blue Jackets host the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers in their home opener. It's going to be an emotional night, as the Gaudreaus are honored and celebrated.

Kent Johnson, who on Friday turns 22, the same age as Gaudreau in the photo, will be in uniform No. 91, the number he picked after gifting 13 to his childhood idol. Jay Johnson will watch from the stands, proud of his son, and both might drift back for a moment to that night in Calgary, when they captured an image a decade ago that's now worth a million words.

“It was great luck that we happened to snap that picture,” the elder Johnson said. “You know, what are the odds that he makes it to the NHL and John’s on his team? It’s been a lot of fun to have that photo and tell the story.”

The Columbus Dispatch / How the Columbus Blue Jackets shifted from a Kepi to the 'Donkey' hat

By Brian Hedger – October 15, 2024

Dean Evason felt it might be a good time to change the way the Blue Jackets celebrate victories.

After learning that his new team had a tradition of handing out a blue replica Civil War soldier's Kepi hat to the player-chosen "player of the game," the Blue Jackets' coach broached the idea of a change with captain Boone Jenner. Something to honor Johnny Gaudreau seemed fitting.

"I talked to the coaches, and we decided, you know, maybe it's time to change," Evason said. "Maybe it's something that Johnny would want or something that represents Johnny."

When he spoke with Jenner, he learned the Blue Jackets were a step ahead.

"I asked Boone to come in and talk to us, and I started telling him, and he goes, 'Yeah, you wanted something different, we've got something different, and we've already ordered it and it's what Johnny wants,'" Evason said, smiling. "It was exactly like that, like it was matter of fact, and he'd already ordered it. They'd already talked about it and made that decision."

Just like that, it was farewell, Kepi. Hello, donkey.

The new hat debuted late Saturday night in Denver after the Blue Jackets spoiled the Colorado Avalanche's home opener. Zach Werenski, an alternate captain who filled in for the injured Jenner, announced the shift to a gray and white donkey hat complete with donkey ears, a gray tail and special No. 13 patch on the side.

Sean Monahan, one of Gaudreau's closest friends and center of a top line that generated three goals in the win, was first to receive the postgame honor. He gladly put the donkey hat on his head and explained its significance a few minutes later to a television audience.

Gaudreau often called teammates "a donkey," so what better way to remember him than with a hat that encompasses his lighter side?

"I said it after the game, but if you knew John, he'd probably called you a donkey before, so that was his word," Monahan said. "He called me a donkey probably a million times. So, it's just a little something to remember him, and obviously it's for after wins."

It wasn't a decision made without careful consideration. The new hat couldn't have been just any old donkey hat. The one selected made it through a round of judging by the Blue Jackets' leadership group.

"Boone actually brought in four or five of them, and we went with that one," Monahan said. "It's there to obviously remember John in the best ways, and I think it's a nice touch."

Evason agrees.

"That, to me, is wonderful, right?" he said. "That's leadership. That's who Boone is, and whoever ... as a group, they decided that's what they were going to do. I said, 'Well, why the donkey hat?' and he said, 'Well, Johnny called everybody 'donkeys.' Like, 'This guy's a donkey. That guy's a donkey,' So, that special player or the guy they feel had the influence on the game or whatever is the 'Donkey of the Game.' Fantastic."

Remembering the Columbus Blue Jackets' Kepi hat tradition

As for the Kepi, it certainly had good run in the Blue Jackets' locker room.

First used in 2014-15, it was handed out to Blue Jackets players in the same manner the donkey hat will continue to be. Monahan will decide who gets it next after the Jackets' win again, and so on.

Perhaps most memorably, former Blue Jackets forward Matt Calvert once wore the Kepi over a blood-stained bandage in the Jackets' locker room during the 2016-17 season. He looked the part of a Union soldier after getting hit in the face with the puck, getting stitches to repair the wound and returning to score a goal in overtime.

"I think the doc was just worried about a little bleeding, but you see this getup they found for me," Calvert said during a postgame interview. "You have your eyes closed the whole time while they're doing the stitches, and it took a while. The doc checks you out, to make sure your head's OK, and I felt good enough to come back."

Others who proudly wore the Kepi during a run that included four playoff appearances and the 2019 sweep of the Tampa Bay Lightning include former captain Nick Foligno, Cam Atkinson, Seth Jones, Sergei Bobrovsky, Artemi Panarin, David Savard, Matt Duchene plus the new wave of Blue Jackets who've donned it the past few years – including Gaudreau.

Now, with his No. 13 jersey hanging in the locker room for every game, he'll also join the Blue Jackets as the "donkeys" celebrate victories.

"It's fitting for us," defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "It was a great idea, and I wish the little guy was still here, calling us that, but 'Monny's' the right guy to get that the first time, for sure. He's battled through a lot (with) the injuries, to get his body to where he's at now, along with coming here and his close friendship with John (to) how he played the first two games of the season. It was an absolute no-brainer."

The Columbus Dispatch / Ahead of Columbus Blue Jackets' home opener, Johnny Gaudreau's dad joins team at practice

By Brian Hedger – October 15, 2024

At the end of Blue Jackets practices since the start of training camp, the team has finished with a sprint around the rink called the "Johnny Skate."

The players stand at one end of the rink and one of them, chosen by the coaches, shoots the length of the ice at an open net. A goal means the team skates one lap around to close out practice. A miss means three laps. One and three, representing the No. 13 worn by Johnny Gaudreau prior to the tragedy that took his life and the life of his younger brother, Matthew, as they biked near their hometown Aug. 29 in Oldmans Township, New Jersey.

Monday morning at Nationwide Arena, the "Johnny Skate" got a new twist. Rather than a player shooting the puck, it the Gaudreau brothers' father, Guy, who put on a Blue Jackets track suit and went through practice with them as an honorary coach.

"We said (to Guy), 'Do you want to shoot on the net?' and he goes, 'Yeah, and I'll miss it on purpose,'" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said, chuckling. "So, I said (to the team), 'Full disclosure, guys, Guy said this,' and Guy said, 'I told him I'm going to miss on purpose, so you guys have to skate.'"

The result was Blue Jackets players zipping around the perimeter of the rink with a pep in their step as their beloved teammate's father clacked a stick on the ice and encouraged them: "Come on, boys, skate!"

After they did, the entire team gathered for a photo with Guy Gaudreau right in the middle.

"I've been told that Johnny Gaudreau was a rink rat," Evason said. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. (Guy Gaudreau) just wanted to be on the ice. He just wanted to be here. ... He just loves the game, loves hockey and it was a joy to have him out there."

Guy Gaudreau gets early start at practice with Columbus Blue Jackets

The coaching staff, including Gaudreau, convened before practice. Gaudreau already had on his track suit, hockey gloves and skates when goalie coach Niklas Backstrom started heading to the ice for pre-practice work with Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov.

"Where ya going, Nick?" Gaudreau asked.

Before long, Backstrom had a second coach heading to the rink with him. They were the first two guys on the ice, followed by Merzlikins and Tarasov.

"I was watching the goalies shoot, and I was watching him," Evason said of Gaudreau. "He was skating around, talking to different players, and he just loved being on the ice. Then, afterwards, he was telling stories about running the rinks that he ran (near Philadelphia), and I chatted with him a bit about when I met with Johnny (in the summer), and he'd skated with Johnny. I said, 'Yeah, Johnny said you work him pretty hard,' and he was like, 'Oh yeah,' and he was very serious. He was like, 'I had him up and down the ice.' He calls them 'wallies' or whatever they were doing that morning."

Gaudreau didn't put the Blue Jackets through any 'wallies,' but he stayed on the ice from the very start to the very end of practice. He also had a question for Evason afterward.

"On the ice, it just looked like he was having a blast, just having fun skating," Evason said. "We finished practice, come in, and I said to him, 'Anytime you want to come out, you're more than welcome,' and he said, 'Are you having a morning skate tomorrow?' I said, 'Yeah.' So, he's coming out (Tuesday) as well."

Columbus Blue Jackets to honor Johnny Gaudreau, Matthew Gaudreau before home opener

That morning skate will be the Jackets' final preparation for their home opener Tuesday night against the Florida Panthers, when the Gaudreau brothers will be honored during a pre-game ceremony and fans will be given No. 13 patches like those the Blue Jackets are wearing on their jerseys all season.

It's going to be an emotional night for everybody in the building. It will also be a chance for Blue Jackets fans to voice their support for the Gaudreaus and let them know how much their sons meant to hockey, in general, and Columbus, in particular. Johnny Gaudreau is revered here for picking the Blue Jackets to sign with in 2022 as a free agent.

It will be poignant, especially for Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan, who each got to know Gaudreau's family while they played with Johnny as Calgary Flames.

"(Guy) came up to me the first time I met him (in Calgary) and he just said, 'I'm really happy you're here, you fit in on this team really well and I love your game. ... Keep playing really hard. You're really helping us,'" defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "That stuck with me, and he's been the same for the last three years. He's a very positive person, and it wasn't just with Johnny."

Guy Gaudreau, Columbus Blue Jackets healing through hockey

Monday's practice wasn't the first time Gaudreau skated with an NHL team since the tragedy. He has also helped the Philadelphia Flyers, the team his sons grew up loving, during multiple practices. He also has a standing offer to attend Flyers' skates from former Blue Jackets head coach John Tortorella.

Tuesday's pregame celebration of the Gaudreau brothers' lives will technically be the second of its kind at Nationwide Arena.

The Blue Jackets also honored them with a pregame video and 13 seconds of silence prior to their first home preseason game against the St. Louis Blues. The Jackets' preseason also provided a different way of honoring Gaudreau during postgame victory celebrations in the locker room.

Their new postgame "player of the game" award is a gray and white donkey hat, with donkey ears and tail, and it features Gaudreau's No. 13 on the side. Sean Monahan, Gaudreau's longtime close friend who signed with the Blue Jackets on July 1 with the intention of reuniting with him, wore it first after the Blue Jackets stunned the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday in Denver.

"If you knew John, he'd probably called you a 'donkey' before," Monahan said. "That was his word. He called me a donkey probably a million times, so it's just a little something to remember him after wins."

Skating through practice with Guy was also memorable, for Monahan and the entire team.

"It's nice," Monahan said. "He gets to live what his son did. It obviously brings emotions. It's nice to have him here in good spirits, and it's always nice to see Guy's face."

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets to honor Johnny Gaudreau with free patches, raffle at home opener

By Nathan Hart – October 15, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets home opener for the 2024-25 season will take on a different tone this year as the team continues to mourn the recent death of star forward Johnny Gaudreau.

The Blue Jackets are set to face the Florida Panthers, the defending Stanley Cup champions, at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Nationwide Arena. Usually, the Blue Jackets' first regular season home game would be preceded by a party and a player "blue carpet" walk, but the team rescheduled those events for Thursday's game.

Instead, the team will show a pre-game video and host a ceremony remembering the lives of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, at 7 p.m. at the home opener. Puck drop is set for 7:13 p.m., a nod to Johnny Gaudreau's jersey number 13.

Johnny Gaudreau, 31, and his brother Matthew Gaudreau, 29, were killed Aug. 29 when a suspected drunk driver struck them while the brothers were biking in Oldmans Township, New Jersey.

Fans attending the home opener will be able to visit a "special concourse tribute" that includes items placed at the arena to remember the brothers, and all attendees will receive a "13" patch like the ones the Blue Jackets will be wearing all season, according to a Blue Jackets press release.

Additionally, proceeds from the game's jersey auction, CBJ Foundation 50/50 raffle, CBJ Foundation gameday auction and "13 Gaudreau 21" lapel pin sales will go to the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation. Fans interested in the auctions, which conclude during the home opener's second intermission, or in the lapel pins can text JOHNNY to 26791 or visit cbjauction.givesmart.com, according to the press release.

The typical home opener festivities will kick off with the CBJ Plaza Party at 3:30 p.m. Oct. 17 before the Blue Jackets take on the Buffalo Sabres. Blue Jackets players will walk the "blue carpet" from 4-5 p.m. that day, and arena doors open at 5:30 p.m., according to the press release.

[NBC4i.com / Bittersweet home opener for the Blue Jackets](https://www.nbc4i.com/story/news/sports/hockey/blue-jackets-2024-10-15/11781111002)

By Jerod Smalley, Anna Hoffman, Kyle Beachy – October 15, 2024

Tuesday was a special – and emotional – night inside Nationwide Arena as the Columbus Blue Jackets played their first home game of the new season, but fueled with emotions like never before.

Blue Jacket Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew died Aug. 29 near the family home in New Jersey. They were out for a bike ride the night before their sister's wedding when they were hit and killed by a suspected drunk driver.

Johnny Gaudreau was one of the top-scoring players in the NHL and was set to start his third season as a Blue Jacket.

"It's bittersweet," fan Emily Capps said. "You get really excited for opening night, and then it's, but then it's the memory of everything."

Johnny Gaudreau was a family man who chose to be a Blue Jacket and chose to raise his family in Columbus.

"There's obviously a sadness in the air, but it's awesome to see the fans and the memorials they've put together," said Blue Jackets fan Logan Capps.

Unfortunately, the Jackets came up a little short against the Stanley Cup-defending Florida Panthers, who won 4-3.

A memorial to the brothers built by the team is filled with tributes compiled from the vigils and memorial services honoring the Gaudreaus.

More than 20 members of the Gaudreau family attended Tuesday's home opener against the Florida Panthers, including Johnny's wife Meredith and their children. Meredith and the children spent time at the memorial before the game; their daughter was wearing a 13 jersey. The name across the back was Daddy.

Johnny Gaudreau earned the nickname Johnny Hockey honestly. Hockey was a passion he shared with his brother and most notably, their father.

For fans, Johnny Gaudreau coming to Columbus meant one thing.

"Hope," fan Allen Hawk said. "We were so bad for so long, to get a player like Johnny that wanted to play in Columbus, it meant the world to me as a fan. I remember jumping around screaming, 'There's no way we got Johnny.'"

The fans welcomed him with open arms during his first two seasons as he quickly became a fan favorite.

"To hear what happened, I mean, it was just the opposite, you know?" Hawk said. "Just that sinking feeling, you know? Hey, it's more than hockey, it's the man."

The number 13 was seen all over the arena — on jerseys, on signs, and on patches handed out to every fan excited for the start of a new season, but missing Johnny Hockey.

"They're going to come together as a team just to remember Johnny and play the best they can," Emily Capps said.

Meredith Gaudreau and her daughter spent time at the memorial for her husband Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew Gaudreau before the Blue Jackets 2024 home opener. (NBC4)

The organization said it knew Johnny's jersey number would be seen throughout the stands, saying it was comforting for the players and the Gaudreau family.'

The Blue Line Store is also doing something special to honor the Gaudreau boys.

Starting Tuesday at Nationwide's store and online, the store started selling t-shirts and pucks with a special 13/21 logo representing Johnny and Matthew's jersey numbers. It's the same logo Blue Jackets players will be wearing all season.

There are 1,000 of each available, all donated by local companies, with 100 percent of the profits going to the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation.

When the Gaudreau brothers died on Aug. 29, the entire Blue Jackets organization scrambled to find the right note to honor the family while also dealing with grief themselves.

The Jackets employ dozens of people who work behind the scenes to make gamedays a reality, and many of those people were the driving force behind the memorials for the home opener and all of the days ahead.

Spectrum News One / Blue Jackets fans react to home opening game without Gaudreau

By Kennedy Chase – October 16, 2024

Fans gathered Tuesday night to cheer on the Columbus Blue Jackets during its home opener.

But it felt different from a regular Blue Jackets home opener because this time they were honoring the late Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew.

“I think it’s going to be more of almost like a memorial. And I know that sounds kind of unfortunate, but it’s just I think he touched so many people in so many different ways that people just want to come here,” said Blue Jackets fan, Brandon Landuyt.

There was a sea of Gaudreau jerseys lining up to get inside of Nationwide arena with Blue Jackets fans excited for this season.

“Excited to have the new season get started. Obviously, there’s a great cloud over what happened this summer with the Johnny Gaudreau tragic passing, but excited to see the team move forward and kind of play in his honor moving forward,” said Blue Jackets fan, Jordan Glick.

Jordan Glick and his brother Cameron have been Blue Jackets fans their whole lives and are season ticket holders. They feel that this tragic loss will motivate the team to play for something bigger than themselves.

“It’s different. It’s a different motivation for a team than we’ve ever had before. We’re usually just a team that’s gritty and things like that, and now we’re playing for something different, playing for Johnny and his family,” said Blue Jackets fan, Cameron Glick.

The Blue Jackets held a ceremony honoring Johnny Gaudreau and his brother before puck drop. The team also placed the number 13, which was Gaudreau’s jersey number, on the ice and wear the number 13 patch on their jerseys.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets honor Johnny Gaudreau by playing 13 seconds without a left winger

By Aaron Portzline – October 16, 2024

When the Columbus Blue Jackets came out for the opening faceoff on Tuesday, something — or someone — was missing.

Sean Monahan was in place for the draw, with Cole Sillinger beside him at right wing. Defensemen Zach Werenski and Erik Gudbranson aligned behind them.

The left wing spot — where Johnny Gaudreau would have played — remained empty. Audible gasps could be heard when the visual took root for the standing-room-only crowd of 18,484 in Nationwide Arena.

It was an emotional night in the arena and not a typical home opener for the Blue Jackets, who lost to the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers 4-3.

Instead, the team dedicated the evening to the memory of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, who were struck and killed while riding bicycles in Oldmans Township, N.J., in August.

Johnny Gaudreau, who played nine seasons with the Calgary Flames before spending the last two in Columbus, was 31. Matthew, who played with his brother at Boston College and had a minor-league pro career, was 29.

When the puck dropped, neither the Blue Jackets nor the Panthers made a move, instead letting the puck come to a rest where Gaudreau, who wore No. 13, would have stood. They stood in place for exactly 13 seconds.

Play resumed a few a seconds later, with 19:47 remaining in the first period.

“It was hard,” said Monahan, choking back tears. “It was a special, special moment that I’ll remember forever.

“I felt like Johnny was watching down on us today. I had a feeling I was going to get one (a goal), and fortunately enough, I did. I definitely could feel John today.”

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was obviously aware of the game-opening tribute. But he didn’t know that Monahan was going to slide the puck to his left winger.

“As soon as that happened, I think it hit everybody,” Evason said. “It hit me because then you visualize him standing there. What a fantastic gesture.”

Said Blue Jackets winger James van Riemsdyk, who has played more than 1,000 NHL games: “That’s definitely gotta be up there as one of the most powerful, emotional moments I’ve seen in my time playing hockey.”

Before the game, with Gaudreau’s widow, Meredith, and the couple’s two small children watching, the Blue Jackets raised a “legacy banner” with Gaudreau’s name and number into the rafters of Nationwide Arena.

Gaudreau’s parents, Guy and Jane, and other family members watched from a private box high above the ice.

Gaudreau's number is not officially retired, a club spokesman said, but it's highly unlikely that No. 13 will ever be worn again by a Columbus player.

Meredith Gaudreau received thunderous applause from the sold-out crowd in Nationwide Arena, walking with her two kids — Noa, who turned 2 last month, and Johnny, who was born last February — among a line of Blue Jackets players on one side of the carpet and Panthers on the other side.

Monahan, who signed with the Blue Jackets this summer to play with Gaudreau, his longtime friend and former teammate in Calgary, stepped out of the line to hold one of the kids during the brief ceremony. The Gaudreau and the Monahan families are close, and they planned to raise their kids together in the leafy suburbs of Columbus.

When Monahan scored his second-period goal, he jumped back onto his skates and extended his right arm toward Gaudreau's banner in the rafters as he was swarmed by teammates.

"I'll reflect on it probably tonight and in the future," Monahan said of the evening. "It means a lot for his family, his wife and the kids. The way they honored him here. The whole league, really. The Panthers were there at the ceremony showing their support.

"Yeah, it means a lot."

Meredith, whose eulogy of Johnny during his memorial service in early September helped the Blue Jackets adopt a Gaudreau-like love and passion for the game so far this season, reiterated the message in a videotaped message on the scoreboard before the game.

"Hey, fifth line, I want to thank you all for your support through this time," she said. "Your outpouring of love has helped our family tremendously. As the team gets ready to take a warmup before the game, I don't want anyone to be sad.

"I want you all to be inspired by the life that John lived. That means to love your family first and foremost, and when it's time to drop the puck, let's love the game that John loved. Thank you, and go Jackets."

The Blue Jackets and Panthers took the ice for pregame warmups wearing No. 13 sweaters. Those sweaters will be auctioned off with the proceeds going to the John & Matthew Gaudreau Foundation.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets embrace emotion in honoring Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau at home opener

By Aaron Portzline – October 15, 2024

About 25 minutes before the Columbus Blue Jackets were scheduled to start practice on Monday in Nationwide Arena, goaltenders Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov emerged through the tunnel to take the ice for early work with goaltending coach Niklas Bäckström.

Right behind the goalie group was Guy Gaudreau, the father of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, who died tragically two months ago when they were struck by a car while riding bicycles on a rural state highway in Oldmans Township, N.J., near their childhood home.

Gaudreau, in town ahead of the Blue Jackets' home opener, arrived early at Nationwide on Tuesday following an invite from the team.

"I've been told that Johnny was a rink rat," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Well, the apple does not fall far from the tree. (Guy) just wanted to be on the ice. He wanted to be here. It looked on the ice like he was just having a blast. He had his gear on early. He saw Nik head out and he asked if he could go, too.

"We finished practice and I told him, anytime you want to come out (on the ice) with us, you're more than welcome. He said, 'Are you having a morning skate tomorrow?' So he's coming out (on Tuesday), too. He wants to be around. And it's fantastic to have him."

Tuesday's game against the Florida Panthers will not celebrate the opening of a new season. Instead, it will celebrate the memory of the Gaudreau brothers. It figures to be an emotional evening in Nationwide Arena, with Guy and other members of his family present for a pregame ceremony.

It's fitting that the game will be against the Panthers, who won the Stanley Cup last spring. One of Florida's top players is Matthew Tkachuk, who became extremely close with Gaudreau during their seasons together in Calgary.

The idea to have Guy Gaudreau join them for practice was sparked by former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella, who invited Gaudreau to take the ice with his Philadelphia Flyers one day last month during training camp. As with the Flyers, the Blue Jackets players seemed energized by his presence.

"Guy's on my mind, in my heart, all the time," said center Sean Monahan, who signed a free-agent deal with Columbus over the summer, in part to play with Johnny Gaudreau, a former teammate in Calgary. They dreamed of raising their kids together in Columbus. "He's a special person and obviously a great dad. Guy was a great coach for his kids. (Having him on the ice with us), it brings emotions. It's nice to have him here in good spirits."

The Blue Jackets have been tight-lipped about any specifics of tonight's ceremony. But even if the coaches and players had a script, it'd be hard to predict the range of emotions they'll experience.

In the days following the tragedy, the Blue Jackets held a vigil outside the main entrance to Nationwide attended by several players and a few thousand fans. A memorial service followed, including heart-wrenching eulogies from Johnny's widow, Meredith, and Matthew's widow, Madeline.

Now comes a chance for the Blue Jackets to honor him in the arena he helped pack the previous two seasons. A sold-out crowd of 18,144 (or more) is expected, with thousands of others watching locally on Bally Sports Ohio, and nationally and internationally on NHL Network and ESPN+.

“To be honest, I’m not sure (what to expect),” Monahan said. “I don’t have an answer. We’re going to step on the ice ... you play for John. If he was here, he’d be really excited for a day like this, the home opener. So we have to be excited for it.

“You never know when the emotions are going to come. They come in waves. When I think about John, I think about how easy-going he was, how he loved to play the game. So you keep that in the back of your mind when you’re out there.”

Under Evason, and with guidance from many of the Blue Jackets’ veteran players, an incredibly tight bond has begun to form in the dressing room, many players have said. They have embraced Gaudreau’s memory and spoken openly and honestly about him. His No. 13 sweater is kept in his stall, at home and on the road.

Defenseman Erik Gudbranson played with Gaudreau in Calgary, too, before signing with the Blue Jackets as a free agent on the same day as Gaudreau in 2022.

“There are going to be some tough moments, no doubt about it,” Gudbranson said. “We still miss him. But once the puck drops, you take all that energy and all those emotions and you put it into a great effort and bring back two points.”

Evason’s only advice to players is to allow themselves to feel their emotions instead of fighting them, even if it can seem overwhelming. He has preached this mantra since the start of training camp, but he’s emphasizing it for Tuesday.

“Everybody’s going to go through it and they’re going to have their own emotions and feelings,” Evason said. “Everyone is going to express it differently, as far as how they’ll react to situations. That’s fine. We’ve talked to our group about this.

“Let go. If you need to cry, then cry. If you need to talk about Johnny, we’ll talk. If you want to just giggle about things, we’ll giggle. This is an unprecedented thing that none of us wanted to go through, that nobody ever wants to. But we have to.

“We’re going to have an emotional day (on Tuesday), but we’re going to use that emotion and turn it into energy for us.”

Even among the lingering sadness of Gaudreau’s loss, the Blue Jackets — through training camp, the preseason and now early in the regular season — have not played or practiced as if a cloud looms over them. They’ve been a high-energy group that seems to be having fun so far this season.

They probably deserved a better fate last Thursday, when they opened the season with a 3-2 loss in St. Paul, Minn., against the Minnesota Wild. Two nights later, however, they came up with a surprise 6-4 win in Denver over the Colorado Avalanche.

There have been moments of great levity, too.

After Saturday’s win, Monahan showed up for his postgame television interview wearing the hat from a donkey costume. Gaudreau, apparently, was fond of calling his friends and teammates “donkeys” as a sign of affection. If he called you a “donkey,” you knew you were tight.

“He called me a donkey probably a million times,” Monahan said with a chuckle.

After one of the Blue Jackets’ preseason games, Evason, who was hired in late June, asked the holdover members of his coaching staff what postgame tradition the organization had for celebrating wins. For the past several years, the Jackets have passed about a Civil War-era kepi to the player of the game.

Evason wondered if they could change that routine to something that would honor Gaudreau, so he set up a meeting with Boone Jenner the following day.

"I started my conversation, and Boone said: 'You want something different? We want something different, too. We already ordered it.'"

Jenner, ever the captain, purchased donkey costumes from Amazon and Halloween websites, he said, but the one players chose came from Etsy.

At the end of Monday's 90-minute practice, Evason gave Guy Gaudreau the reins for a drill they often use to end practice. The players gather at one end of the ice and a player is chosen to fire a puck at the goal on the opposite end. If he scores, they take one lap. If he misses, they take three.

It is called the "Johnny skate," Evason said.

Guy, who has spent hours upon hours in rinks round New Jersey and Philadelphia, is known to have led Johnny and Matthew on many difficult skating drills, even after they turned pro and came home in the summer. He went full bore on Tuesday, too.

"I asked Guy if he'd like to take the shot," Evason said, "and he said, 'I'll miss it on purpose.' And he did."

The Gaudreau family will be surrounded tonight, taken into the embrace of an adoring fan base that will never forget Gaudreau's decision, as the most sought-after free agent on the market in 2022, to choose Columbus as his team for the prime of his career. The crowd will be full of No. 13 sweaters and Johnny Hockey T-shirts.

The Gaudreaus have repeatedly thanked fans in Columbus, Calgary and across the hockey world for their support, saying their messages and memories of Johnny and Matthew have sustained them through their grief.

The memorial service and the vigil were so quiet you could hear sniffles and sobbing in the crowd. There will be tears tonight, too, but the cheers and love will overwhelm them. That's the plan, anyway.

Associated Press / For Johnny and Matthew: Blue Jackets play their home opener with Gaudreaus in mind

By Tim Reynolds – October 15, 2024

Johnny Gaudreau's Columbus teammates were given a few options for how to handle their emotions during the Blue Jackets' home opener.

If you want to cry, cry.

If you want to laugh, laugh.

The only rules — play the game the way “Johnny Hockey” would and with him in mind.

Emotions ran high in Columbus on Tuesday night, when the Blue Jackets paid tribute to their star and his late brother Matthew at their home opener against the Florida Panthers. Among the highlights: A banner was raised to the rafters in Gaudreau's memory as both teams stick-tapped the ice in the traditional hockey salute and his family looked on, arms intertwined.

At game time, the teams stood still as 13 seconds — Johnny Gaudreau's number — ran off the clock and with his left-wing position vacant, the Blue Jackets sending four skaters onto the ice instead of the usual five. The puck dropped, and the Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan passed it to Florida's Sam Bennett.

Monahan and Bennett were teammates with Johnny Gaudreau in Calgary. It couldn't have been more fitting.

“I don't want anyone to be sad,” Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's wife, said in a recorded message played shortly before face-off. “I want you all to be inspired by the life that John lived. That means love your family first and foremost, and when it's time to drop the puck let's love the game that John loved.”

Johnny Gaudreau, the Blue Jackets' star who would have been entering his third season with the club and 11th NHL season overall, and his brother Matthew Gaudreau were killed on Aug. 29 when police said they were struck by a suspected drunken driver while they were riding their bicycles on a rural road in New Jersey on the eve of their sister Katie's wedding.

“It's such an unprecedented thing and something that obviously none of us wanted to go through, and nobody ever wants to go through it,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “But we have to.”

The 31-year-old Gaudreau wore jersey No. 13 for the Blue Jackets. Matthew Gaudreau — who was 29 and played five pro seasons in the American Hockey League, East Coast Hockey League and in Sweden — wore jersey No. 21. All 32 NHL teams are wearing decals on their helmets with 13, 21 and the letter G on their helmets through Oct. 24. USA Hockey has a similar tribute for its teams at all levels this year.

On Tuesday, the “13” tributes were everywhere. Both the Blue Jackets and Panthers took the ice for warmups wearing jerseys bearing the name Gaudreau and jersey number 13; those sweaters will be auctioned and raffled off to benefit the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation. There's “13” on the ice behind the goals. All fans in attendance received a “13” patch, the ones Blue Jackets players will be wearing on their jerseys this season.

“It's an emotional night for the hockey world,” Bennett said. “I'm glad I can be here and honor his legacy in any way.”

Gaudreau was absolutely beloved by players, whether they ever were his teammate or not. Florida star Matthew Tkachuk, who missed the game with illness, knows of Gaudreau's affinity for purple Gatorade

and bags of Skittles. So, every Panthers player got off the bus in Columbus on Tuesday with Gatorade and Skittles in their hands.

“Johnny was a huge part of the hockey community but to me he was much more than that,” Tkachuk said. “A great friend, teammate and family man.”

The Blue Jackets set up a replica of Gaudreau’s locker in the arena for fans to visit. Many fans did, reading some of the signs that were left in front of Nationwide Arena in the hours and days after the accident that claimed the lives of the brothers. They hugged and took photos, wiped away tears and reminisced.

Kristen and Katie, the sisters of Johnny and Matthew, visited the memorial during the game. Kristen donned a No. 13 Columbus jersey in the home blue, while Katie wore a leather jacket with her brothers’ numbers of 21 and 13 on the front and stacked across the back, along with “Gaudreau.”

Johnny Gaudreau — all of 5-foot-9 and 165 pounds — was a star at Boston College before making it to the NHL, his debut coming in Calgary’s finale for the 2013-14 season. His first goal came on his first shot in his first game, and his star only kept shining brighter from there.

The player who fished the puck out of the net after Gaudreau’s first goal was Monahan.

“He had an impact on so many people,” Monahan said.

Monahan never aspired to be a donkey. Going forward, the Blue Jackets will clamor to be one.

Johnny Gaudreau used that term — “donkey” — endearingly around friends and teammates. The Blue Jackets had a celebration for about a decade where the player of the game gets to wear a Civil War-style kepi hat, the recipient selected by the previous one. The kepi is retired. The player of the game now gets a donkey hat. Monahan was the first to receive it.

“I’m really happy that we’ve kind of switched it up,” Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. “I think it’s fitting for us. It was a great idea. And, you know, we wish the little guy was still here calling us that, But Monny is the right guy to get that the first time, for sure.”

The tributes aren’t over. They’ll keep going for years to come. Guy Gaudreau, the late brothers’ father and a longtime coach, was on the ice with the Blue Jackets for practice in Columbus on Monday and was back for morning skate on Tuesday. And the banner bearing Johnny’s name went up, fans chanted “Johnny Hockey” as his family couldn’t help but smile.

There was a game afterward. It seemed secondary.

“The first part,” Panthers coach Paul Maurice said, “is clearly the most important part of the event tonight.”

Associated Press / Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau's father takes the ice with Blue Jackets on eve of home opener

By Tim Reynolds – October 14, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets now have what they call a “Johnny skate” at the end of practice. It’s a shot someone takes from the far end of the ice toward the opposite goal. Make it, players skate one lap. Miss it, players skate three laps.

That’s as in 1 and 3. 13. Johnny Gaudreau’s jersey number.

And the shooter on Monday missed it on purpose. Nobody minded, since it was Johnny Gaudreau’s father.

Guy Gaudreau — the father of the late brothers John and Matthew Gaudreau — was a guest at the Blue Jackets’ practice in Columbus, a day before the team’s home opener against the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers. He skated around with a few players, tapped his stick on the ice to encourage players as they skated past and had a fist-bump for everybody before the session ended

“He loves the game, loves hockey,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “It was a joy to have him out there.”

Guy Gaudreau is former hockey coach at Hollydell Ice Arena and Gloucester Catholic High School in New Jersey. John Gaudreau — a star who would have been entering his third season with the Blue Jackets and 11th full NHL season — and Matthew Gaudreau were killed on Aug. 29 when police said they were struck by a suspected drunken driver while they were riding their bicycles on a rural road in South Jersey on the eve of their sister Katie’s wedding.

“It’s great to have Guy here,” Blue Jackets forward Sean Kuraly said. “Just reminds you of the exact same stuff John would do.”

Monday wasn’t Guy Gaudreau’s first time on the ice this season; he was a guest of the Philadelphia Flyers last month. Evason said the team got the idea to have Guy Gaudreau at practice from the gesture that Flyers coach John Tortorella made.

Tuesday night will be emotional for the Blue Jackets — for the whole NHL, really. The tributes to the Gaudreau brothers have poured in from around the hockey world for the past several weeks. In Calgary, where “Johnny Hockey” started his NHL career, goaltender Dustin Wolf’s mask is now a memorial of sorts to the Gaudreau brothers, featuring both their jersey numbers, Johnny Gaudreau in a Flames uniform and it even includes purple Gatorade and Skittles, two of his go-to treats.

Guy Gaudreau was asked if he wanted to address the team Monday and initially declined, but eventually had a bit of a chat with players. And in case there was any doubt about whether he enjoyed being on the ice with Johnny’s club on Monday, he had a question for Evason after practice.

The question: Are you having a morning skate on Tuesday?

When told that the Blue Jackets are, Guy Gaudreau said he’d be there for that as well.

“He just wants to be around,” Evason said. “It’s fantastic.”

[The Washington Post / What the NHL's Blue Jackets, still mourning a teammate, carry with them](#)

By Bailey Johnson – October 15, 2024

It was love, in its purest form. That was how Johnny Gaudreau played hockey, Erik Gudbranson said.

Gaudreau was Gudbranson's teammate twice over: once with the Calgary Flames, then again on the Columbus Blue Jackets. It was Gudbranson who told the Blue Jackets that Gaudreau — one of the NHL's brightest stars — was interested in making Columbus his home. And it's Gudbranson, along with a host of others, grappling with an incalculable loss.

You can see Gaudreau's face here in this Ohio city, blown up and displayed on the side of Nationwide Arena, where the Blue Jackets will play their first home game of the season Tuesday. He is captured in profile, bright eyes focused ahead. Perhaps unleashing a wrister, the wicked shot that helped make him a 200-goal scorer.

The Blue Jackets opened their season this month without Gaudreau, who was killed along with his brother, Matthew, on the eve of their sister's wedding. The pair were riding bikes on an August evening in New Jersey when they were fatally struck by a driver who prosecutors have alleged had road-rage issues and was driving with a blood alcohol level above the legal limit.

A few days later, the Gaudreau family gathered for a joint funeral of inseparable brothers. Teammates served as pallbearers. Tributes poured in.

"Anyone who knows these two young men know that they have been loved and that they loved," the Rev. Tony Penna, director of campus ministry at Boston College, where the brothers played hockey, said at the funeral.

As the NHL begins its season, the displays of remembrance have continued. On all of the league's 32 teams, players will wear a black sticker with Johnny's No. 13 and Matthew's No. 21 on their helmets. One player, 5-foot-8 Montreal winger Cole Caufield, changed his number so he could honor the undersized talent who inspired him. Caufield scored the first goal of the Canadiens' season, then pointed to the sky.

In late September, the Blue Jackets gathered to celebrate the birthday of Gaudreau's daughter, Noa, who was turning 2. Gaudreau's father, Guy, was on the ice with the team Monday, ahead of Columbus's first home game. The Blue Jackets will keep Gaudreau's stall preserved in the dressing room and take his jersey with them for road games, carrying it along through the 82-game NHL season, a grind that stretches to April.

The team faces a question that feels both unfathomable and universal at the same time. After all, it is the same question everyone faces after such loss.

How do you go on?

'I'll miss him the rest of my life'

Blue Jackets General Manager Don Waddell has walked this path before. In 2003, when Waddell was the general manager of the Atlanta Thrashers, forward Dan Snyder died just three days before the season started. The Thrashers dedicated the ensuing season to Snyder; they, as the Blue Jackets will, kept Snyder's jersey hanging in the dressing room all year.

Waddell was only three months into his tenure as GM in Columbus when the Gaudreau brothers died. He was hired to stabilize a rebuilding franchise and help the Blue Jackets return to contention, but his decades of experience in the NHL took on a different importance after the crash.

“The players being together daily, for practice and games, is the best healing process for everybody,” Waddell said. “I check in on everyone every day to see how they are. I know we’re going to have some harder days, but the players being together helps all of us and how they’ve responded. But also they know Johnny would want them to play hockey.”

Gaudreau picked up the nickname “Johnny Hockey” at Boston College, where he won a national championship and the Hobey Baker Award as the best player in the NCAA. Despite his diminutive size — officially 5-foot-9 and 163 pounds, though both measures were generous — Gaudreau was an electrifying talent.

His stature allowed him to dart around the ice, evading bigger defenders. Gaudreau’s vision with the puck, his highlight-reel skill and the obvious joy he felt when he was on the ice made him a fan favorite at just about every stop on his hockey journey.

When Gaudreau’s teammates got the news of his death, many already had returned to Columbus from their offseason homes to prepare for the upcoming season. There was an immediate desire, Gudbranson said, to gather as a group.

“Did that make it easier? I don’t think anything makes it easier, but being around your teammates and those you care about was very important to us and continues to be,” he said. “Maybe that routine at the rink and what we’re doing has maybe [broken up] the day a little bit, but those feelings keep coming back here and there. I don’t think that’s ever really going to change.”

Columbus Coach Dean Evason was hired barely over a month before the crash. One of the first things he and Waddell decided to do was rearrange the players in the dressing room, mixing up long-held routines and integrating veterans with young players throughout the room.

Gaudreau, 31, was to sit between 24-year-old Kirill Marchenko and Sean Monahan, one of Gaudreau’s best friends. Gaudreau and Monahan played together in Calgary, and Monahan signed a five-year deal with the Blue Jackets in July because he wanted to reunite with him on the ice.

Monahan’s first son was born in May, just three months after Gaudreau and his wife, Meredith, welcomed their second child, a son named Johnny. The two had houses a few doors apart and visions for a future with their families in Columbus.

“I’ll miss him the rest of my life,” Monahan told reporters when the Blue Jackets opened training camp in mid-September.

Monahan scored his first goal with the Blue Jackets on Saturday, his 30th birthday. Marchenko, the young forward on the other side of Gaudreau’s stall, passed up a look at the empty net to give Monahan the goal.

After the game, Columbus’s second of the season, Monahan was the recipient of a new hat the Blue Jackets will give out to the team’s player of the game. It’s a donkey with the number 13 on the side, in honor of Gaudreau, who always called his friends donkeys.

In the midst of tragedy, there are moments of joy, such as Monahan’s goal, the team’s first win and the cheers from his teammates when he donned the hat. There are also moments when the gravity of the loss comes rushing back. It crosses Gudbranson’s mind every time he gets behind the wheel.

“The thing that stands out to me deeply, beyond trying to care for those close to you a little bit more, is just pushing the message: Don’t drive like an idiot. Please don’t,” Gudbranson said. “If you’re drinking, just get a ride. ... There’s no reason for this to happen. There really isn’t.”

‘He just loved playing the game’

On Tuesday, the Blue Jackets will play their home opener against the Florida Panthers, the defending Stanley Cup champions. Fans who enter the building from the east will pass under the photo of Gaudreau that hangs on display, now a perpetual reminder of a staggering loss.

Both teams will wear Gaudreau jerseys during warmups, and the brothers will be honored with a pregame video tribute and ceremony. Then the puck will drop at 7:13 p.m., and Gaudreau’s still-grieving teammates and the fan base that surrounds them will do their best to enjoy a hockey game.

“He just loved playing the game. He loved competing. His eyes rolled, and he turned into a different person when he went on the ice,” Gudbranson said. “It was for the love of the game. I think that’s the only way of approaching it. Love the process. Love the grind. Love the journey we’re about to embark on. Appreciate the time that you have in this league and on this planet because, as we’ve learned, it’s a very fragile thing.”

CNN / Heartbreak and tears remain omnipresent as Blue Jackets honor Johnny Gaudreau and his brother ahead of home opener

By David Close and Kevin Dotson – October 15, 2024

If there were dry eyes at Nationwide Arena, the game broadcast didn't show them.

Ahead of Tuesday night's home opener against the Florida Panthers, the Columbus Blue Jackets hosted a ceremony to honor and remember a pair of brothers whose recent deaths have impacted so many people.

It is evident raw emotion still prevails following the tragic deaths of Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau and his younger brother Matthew on August 29, when a suspected drunk driver struck and killed the siblings while they were riding their bikes the night before their sister Kate's wedding.

Both the Blue Jackets and the Panthers participated in pregame warm-ups wearing Gaudreau No. 13 jerseys.

With many friends and members of the Gaudreau family in attendance, Johnny Gaudreau's widow Meredith, along with his brother-in-law Eddie, carried Gaudreau's children Noa and Johnny to center ice.

Meredith wiped away tears as a banner featuring Gaudreau's number 13 and "1993-2024" was unveiled. The Gaudreau parents and sisters hugged each other in the bench area as the banner was raised to the rafters.

Afterwards, the fans in attendance started a chant of "Johnny Hockey," a reference to the left wing's nickname.

When it came time to drop the puck, the Blue Jackets left Gaudreau's position empty as the players on both teams' benches stood for the emotional moment.

The puck was tapped to Johnny's empty place on the ice as 13 seconds were allowed to run off the clock before an official skated in to pick up the puck. The game was then restarted.

Earlier on Tuesday night, Meredith Gaudreau spoke to those gathered at the arena in a pre-recorded video message.

"Hey, fifth line. I want to thank you all for your support through this time. Your outpouring of love has helped our family tremendously," she said in the video.

"As the team gets ready to take a warm up before the game, I don't want anyone to be sad. I want you all to be inspired by the life that John lived, that means love your family first and foremost. And when it's time to drop the puck, let's love the game that John loved. Thank you and go Jackets."

The wives of both brothers are pregnant.

In her eulogy during her late husband's funeral in early September, Meredith revealed she was in her ninth week of pregnancy with the couple's third child.

"In less than three years of marriage, we've created a family of five. It doesn't even sound possible. But I look at it as the ultimate blessing," she said on September 10.

"How lucky am I to be the mother of John's three babies?"

Matthew's wife, Madeline Gaudreau, is expecting the couple's first child, a boy, next month.

Earlier this week, she shared pictures and a video on social media from a recent baby shower thrown for baby Tripp.

“Hug your loved ones, cherish your time on earth, be grateful, help others, stay positive, be humble, do what is right, and be kind. It truly makes a difference in your own life & the lives of others! BE A GOOD HUMAN like Matty & Johnny,” Madeline Gaudreau posted on Instagram.

The older brother should have been on the ice Tuesday night, playing in his 11th NHL season and third with the Jackets.

Instead, his No. 13 was seen throughout the building, with the team handing out patches with the 31-year-old’s famed jersey number to everyone at the arena.

In another subtle tip of the cap to the late NHL All-Star, the team announced ahead of the game that puck drop was set for 7:13 p.m. ET —13 minutes later than the usual top-of-the-hour time.

NBC TODAY Show / Johnny Gaudreau and brother Matthew honored at Blue Jackets home opener

By Liz Calvario and Kavita Varma-White – October 15, 2024

Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew Gaudreau were honored at the Columbus Blue Jackets opening home game.

Ahead of the NHL team's game against the Florida Panthers on October 15, the late Johnny Gaudreau's teammates gathered to pay tribute to him and his brother after they were killed by an alleged drunk driver in August.

Johnny Gaudreau's wife, Meredith Gaudreau, was in attendance, along with their 2-year-old daughter Noa and 7-month-old son Johnny, who were wearing #13 jerseys. The three appeared on the ice as a banner was raised with the late athlete's number. Meredith Gaudreau wiped away tears as little Noa appeared to wave to the banner.

A tribute video of Johnny Gaudreau's early beginnings and hockey career was shown, with the late star talking about his love for the game. The video also highlighted his marriage and family.

In a pre-recorded video, Meredith Gaudreau, who is pregnant with their third child, said she didn't "want anyone to be sad. I want you all to be inspired by the life that John lived."

"That means love your family first and foremost, and when it's time to drop the puck, let's love the game that John loved," she said.

A slideshow filled with family photos was also shared, with songs like "Memory Lane" by Old Dominion, "Small Town Girl" by Dustin Lynch and "Stargazing" by Justin Jesso and Kygo played. As the teams stepped out onto the ice, fans cheered, "Johnny hockey."

Johnny Gaudreau's family, including his mom and dad, were also in attendance, as was Matthew Gaudreau's widow, Madeline Gaudreau, who is expecting her and her late husband's first child.

A PSA was also shared in a video before the game, saying, "If you are drinking tonight, do not drink and drive."

To continue the tributes, the Blue Jackets players wore a "13" patch on their jerseys, which they will wear all season. Everyone who attended the game also received the "13" patch.

When the game started, the team "saved a spot for Johnny" by not including a left winger and 13 seconds taken off the clock for him.

At Nationwide Arena in Columbus, there is also a special tribute for the brothers that includes jerseys and memorabilia. During the night there were various opportunities to raise funds for the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation, including a jersey auction, raffle and lapel pin sales.

Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau were riding bikes when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver that resulted in their deaths, according to police. The brothers were in their hometown and set to attend their sister's wedding.

Madeline Gaudreau recently held her baby shower and paid tribute to her late husband with the decor. A poster shared on her Instagram read "Welcome To Our Baby Shower, Matty & Madeline."

Madeline Gaudreau, who is expecting a boy, wrote on her post, "my husband would have loved all the balloons."

“The way you were able to tie in my husband brought instant tears when I walked in,” she wrote. “All my friends and family, nothing will bring his dad back or uncle John, but I am glad he has so many amazing people around him to remind him how amazing they were.”

Last month, the Blue Jackets and their families also celebrated Johnny and Meredith’s daughter Noa’s second birthday by gathering and setting up a giant lawn sign that read, “Happy 2nd Birthday Noa!”

FOX News / Johnny Gaudreau's best friend on Blue Jackets scores goal, points to late star's name hanging in rafters

By Ryan Morik – October 16, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets home opener on Tuesday night was filled with every emotion.

It was their first game on their home ice since their star left-winger, Johnny Gaudreau, and his brother were killed back in August.

The Jackets honored the brothers with plenty of tributes, including raising a banner with Gaudreau's No. 13, a makeshift memorial, and even taking the ice a man short.

However, what happened in the second period could only be explained by destiny.

Sean Monahan played with Gaudreau for seven seasons in Calgary with the Flames, while this was set to be Gaudreau's third season in Columbus.

Monahan, though, signed with Columbus to team up with his best friend. However, the two would never share the ice in Jackets sweaters.

However, Gaudreau's presence was certainly felt, as Monahan scored a goal in the second period, and almost immediately pointed to Gaudreau's No. 13 in the rafters.

Monahan took the opening faceoff, passing the puck to the empty spot on the ice, where Gaudreau should have been.

Both the Jackets and Florida Panthers wore Gaudreau jerseys with his No. 13 during warmups.

Gaudreau and his brother Matthew, aged 31 and 29 respectively, were killed in late August by a suspected drunk driver while riding their bikes in their hometown in New Jersey the day before their sister's wedding.

Gaudreau's father, Guy, was with the team at their morning skates Monday and Tuesday.

"It looked like he was just having a blast," Jackets head coach Dean Evason said. "Just having fun skating. I said to him 'any time you want to come out, you're more than welcome.'"

Guy Gaudreau attended a Philadelphia Flyers practice last month. The Gaudreaus live right outside of Philly.

CBS Sports / Blue Jackets honor Johnny Gaudreau, Matthew Gaudreau with emotional tribute in home-opener against Panthers

By Austin Nivison – October 15, 2024

On an emotional Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena, the Columbus Blue Jackets honored Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau ahead of their home-opener against the Florida Panthers. Both teams participated in heartfelt tributes to the late Blue Jackets star and his brother throughout the night.

Back in August, the Gaudreau brothers died after being struck by a vehicle in New Jersey. They were riding bicycles near their family home when a car veered onto the right shoulder of the road and hit them.

Just two years earlier, Johnny Gaudreau signed a seven-year contract with the Blue Jackets, becoming the biggest free agent acquisition in franchise history. In his two seasons with the team, Gaudreau quickly became a teammate and fan favorite while tallying 33 goals and 101 assists in 161 games.

In the wake of Gaudreau's death, the Blue Jackets' home-opener served as a memorial and a celebration of life. Both teams went the extra mile to honor the memories of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

Skip in 4s

Panthers pay respects to Gaudreau

The tributes got started long before the opening puck drop. According to Panthers rinkside reporter Katie Engelson, each member of the team brought a purple Gatorade and Skittles in honor of Gaudreau's favorite snacks. The idea was suggested by Matthew Tkachuk, one of Gaudreau's best friends in the NHL.

Tkachuk and Gaudreau played together in Calgary from 2016 to 2022, and the pair of American-born stars formed a tight bond. Tkachuk didn't travel with the Panthers due to an illness, but he did release a statement on Gaudreau before the game.

Blue Jackets memorialize Gaudreau brothers pregame

In the lead-up to the game, Columbus unveiled its memorial to the Gaudreau brothers inside the arena. The memorial includes replica lockers for Johnny and Matthew, game-worn equipment and things from the fan memorial outside the arena. It will be on display for fans to view throughout the entire 2024-25 season.

Players on both teams wear special warm-up jerseys

When the Blue Jackets and Panthers took the ice for warm-ups, every player wore Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13. Those speciality jerseys were then auctioned off to raise money for the Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation.

Jackets honor Johnny Gaudreau with emotional ceremony

In the final minutes before puck drop, the Blue Jackets honored Johnny with a pregame video that paid tribute to his life on and off the ice. The video went through Gaudreau's childhood, his love of hockey, his family and his career in Calgary and Columbus. It ended with a quote from Gaudreau about how he wanted to be remembered when his career was over.

"I think when it's all said and done, I want to be remembered as a guy who wanted to be around the rink, around his friends, around his family," Gaudreau said. "I could probably go on and on with the list, but just being a hockey guy a guess."

Following the video, Gaudreau's family was invited onto the ice to watch as Gaudreau's No. 13 was lifted to the rafters. As the banner made its way upward, the fans in Nationwide Arena broke out into a "Johnny Hockey" chant.

As Gaudreau's family made their way off the ice, a video message from Johnny's wife, Meredith, played on the Jumbotron. She thanked the Columbus fan base for all its support and encouraged them to "love the game that John loved."

On the opening puck drop, the Blue Jackets came out with just four skaters, leaving Gaudreau's left wing open. Columbus center Sean Monahan, a longtime friend of Gaudreau's, took the opening draw and pushed the puck to the vacant spot. The teams let 13 seconds roll off the clock while the crowd chanted "Love you, Johnny."

Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets Honor Johnny Gaudreau With Poignant Tributes During Home Opener

By Karl Rasmussen – October 15, 2024

It was an emotional night in Columbus, Ohio, as the Columbus Blue Jackets paid tribute to the late Johnny Gaudreau before their home opener on Tuesday against the Florida Panthers.

There were multiple moving nods to Johnny and his brother Matthew, who tragically passed away in a traffic collision while riding bicycles in their hometown of Oldsman Township, N.J., on Aug. 29, one day before their sister's wedding.

Panthers players arrived to the arena two hours early, each carrying a purple Gatorade and Skittles with them, which were Gaudreau's favorites. That idea stemmed from Florida winger Matthew Tkachuk, who played alongside Gaudreau on the Calgary Flames.

The Blue Jackets also set up a memorial for Gaudreau inside Nationwide Arena, which includes a replica locker with his game-worn jersey hanging in it, as well as items from the fan memorial that was held previously.

In what was another heartwarming moment prior to puck drop, the Blue Jackets ceremoniously raised a No. 13 Gaudreau jersey to the rafters at the arena and held a moment of silence in his honor.

Additionally, players from both teams warmed up in Gaudreau jerseys, which were hung up in each locker. The warmup jerseys are being sold and auctioned after the game, with proceeds going to the John and Meredith Gaudreau Foundation.

When it came to game time, the Blue Jackets took the ice with only four skaters, leaving their left wing position vacant. The two teams allowed for 13 seconds to run off the clock before the puck was officially dropped and play began.

Fans did their part, too. The crowd erupted early on with a loud and unified chants of "Love you, Johnny" and also chanted Gaudreau's nickname, "Johnny Hockey."

With Gaudreau's family in attendance, the organization did an excellent job of displaying just how much Johnny meant not only to the team, but to the entire NHL, both on and off the ice.

Bleacher Report / Johnny, Matthew Gaudreau Honored Ahead of Blue Jackets' Home Opener vs. Panthers

By Joseph Zucker – October 15, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Florida Panthers honored Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau before Columbus' home opener on Tuesday night.

Prior to dropping the puck, the Blue Jackets shared a video celebrating Johnny's life on and off the ice:

Friends and family members of the Gaudreaus were on hand for the game and watched a banner with his No. 13 jersey raised toward the rafters of Nationwide Arena.

The Jackets previously announced they'll wear a commemorative helmet decal with the Gaudreaus' jersey numbers throughout the 2024-25 NHL season. They and the Panthers had Johnny's name and number on their pregame warmups.

Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk was teammates with Johnny for six seasons on the Calgary Flames. An illness kept Tkachuk out of the lineup on Tuesday, but he found a special way to pay homage to Gaudreau.

Panthers rinkside reporter Katie Engleson reported he arranged for Panthers players to arrive with purple Gatorade and a pack of Skittles since both were staples for Gaudreau.

"Unfortunately, I won't be there tonight in Columbus," Tkachuk said in a statement shared by the Panthers. "Johnny was a huge part of the hockey community but to me he was much more than that. A great friend, teammate, and family man. Not a day goes by without me thinking about Johnny and Matthew.

"The biggest thing I'm going to miss about tonight is not being able to see Meredith, Noa, little Johnny, Guy and Jane. Would love to give them all big hugs! Johnny will be my teammate forever."

Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau were struck and killed by a suspected drunk driver while cycling in New Jersey in August.

Johnny spent 11 years in the NHL, his first nine with the Flames and his last two in Columbus. Matthew skated for Boston College, following in his older brother's footsteps, and eventually returned to his high school alma mater, Gloucester Catholic, as its coach.

[The New York Post / Blue Jackets have emotional tribute to Johnny Gaudreau at home opener](#)

By Michael Blinn – October 15, 2024

The night was about hockey in Columbus, but it was also about so much more.

The Blue Jackets and their fans, still reeling from the August death of Johnny Gaudreau, honored the fallen star forward on Tuesday in their home opener, a night filled with memories and emotional tributes from the jump.

Fans entering Nationwide Arena were greeted by a massive display featuring a replica of Gaudreau's locker, his game-worn equipment jerseys from his time in Columbus and at Boston College.

It will remain throughout the season, the team announced.

The windows were lined with sticks and papered with signs and items from the franchise's fan memorial, which encompassed the outside of the venue in days after the 31-year-old's death, along with his brother Matthew, after they were struck while biking in Oldmans Township, NJ.

Their deaths sent shockwaves throughout the NHL and hockey community, as evidenced by league-wide paeans and moments of silence to honor them throughout the following weeks and into the preseason.

That the Blue Jackets, a team just three years removed from the tragic death of goalie Matiss Kivlenieks at 24, were facing the Panthers in their first game in front of home fans this season, was fitting.

Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Bennett, two stars on the reigning Stanley Cup winners' roster, began their careers alongside Gaudreau in Calgary.

Tkachuk, sidelined for the game by illness, made sure to pay tribute to his friend.

"Johnny was a huge part of the hockey community but to me he was much more than that," he said in a statement posted to social media. "A great friend, teammate, and family man. Not a day goes by without me thinking about Johnny and Matthew.

"The biggest thing I'm going to miss about tonight is not being able to see Meredith, Noa, little Johnny, Guy and Jane. Would love to give them all big hugs! Johnny will be my teammate forever."

Players arrived to the arena with Skittles and purple Gatorade, Johnny's favorites, according to ESPN.

Both teams took to the ice for warmups wearing Johnny's No. 13. The Blue Jackets played a slideshow of Gaudreau and his family on the ice as it was resurfaced.

A heart-tugging five-and-a-half minute video, narrated by the late player and featuring videos and photos from his career and life, was shown to the arena.

The team raised a banner with Gaudreau's name and number to the rafters as his family was on the ice — alongside his former Flames runningmate Sean Monahan, who signed with the Blue Jackets this offseason for the chance to skate with Gaudreau again.

Gaudreau's parents, Guy and Jane, along with sisters Katie and Kristen, were overcome with emotion as fans thunderously chanted "Johnny Hockey!"

"I don't want anyone to be sad," Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's wife, said in a prerecorded message played before face-off. "I want you all to be inspired by the life that John lived. That means love your family first and foremost, and when it's time to drop the puck let's love the game that John loved."

For the opening puck drop, Columbus coach Dean Evason sent out four players, leaving Gaudreau's left-wing spot empty, and players stood as Monahan passed the puck to where his best friend should have been waiting while the clock ran for 13 seconds.

Following an emotional summer that couldn't help but bleed into the fall, the Blue Jackets gave Gaudreau a befitting sendoff.

Then came the hard part: following that up with hockey.

Cole Sillinger's opening goal :41 into the second period sent Nationwide Arena into a frenzy, Monahan staked the Blue Jackets to a 2-1 lead with a second-effort goal — which he capped by pointing to Gaudreau's banner in the rafters.

The high-powered Florida offense reeled off three straight goals before newcomer James van Riemsdyk made it a 4-3 deficit late in the third, but a spent Columbus team couldn't complete the comeback.

"We do want them to use the emotion and embrace that emotion and if it's you're feeling sad or anything just use that and turn it into a positive emotion moving forward," Evason told reporters before the game.

"We've talked from Day 1 about what Johnny would want to do and how he would act, and what he would say and continue to do that. That's what we're doing and so, 100 percent, use that emotion but don't be afraid of it."

Florida Hockey now / Blue Jackets Stop Game vs. Panthers, Honor Gaudreau in Emotional Ceremony

By George Richards – October 16, 2024

Johnny Gaudreau was remembered and honored by the Columbus Blue Jackets prior to their home opener against the Florida Panthers on Tuesday night.

After an emotional 13-minute pregame ceremony which featured personal videos, an introduction of his family, and the raising of a banner with Gaudreau's No. 13 on it, the puck was dropped on the game against the Panthers.

But the tribute was not finished just yet.

The Blue Jackets lined up one player short on the ice — they went without a left wing, the spot Gaudreau would have occupied — and after the puck was dropped, both teams let 13 seconds run off the clock in silence.

Sean Monahan, who played with Gaudreau in Calgary, took the opening faceoff and sent the puck to Sam Bennett.

"It's a tough night," said Bennett, a former teammate of Gaudreau's in Calgary. "What their family's gone through, it's unthinkable."

Gaudreau, of course, wore No. 13 and both teams wore special Gaudreau jerseys — all with his number on them — for warmups.

The two teams also lined up across from each other along a strip of carpet on the ice as family members walked through the two teams to watch the Gaudreau banner go up into the rafters.

Although Gaudreau's No. 13 was not officially retired Tuesday, the Blue Jackets say they "do not anticipate any player wearing it ever again."

Johnny, 31, and Matthew Gaudreau, 29, died Aug. 29 when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver who has been charged with two counts of death by auto, while riding bicycles near their home in Salem County, New Jersey.

"This is probably very necessary for the fans and the community here," coach Paul Maurice said. "We're honored to be a part of it. It will be difficult. We have players in our room who were close friends. But the game is going to start when the puck drops and hockey will take over. But I think the first part of this is going to be the most important part of the event."

Maurice and Bennett both said they were honored the Panthers just happened to be Columbus' first home opponent and were able to be part of honoring Gaudreau.

Not only did the Panthers wear Gaudreau's name and number during warmups, but all of the players came to Nationwide Arena carrying bottles of purple Gatorade and a bag of Skittles.

Those were Gaudreau's favorite snacks — and the idea to come to the arena with them came from Matthew Tkachuk.

"This is really important for guys like me," Maurice said. "So, I don't know the family; I don't know the young man. But you feel the loss, right? I have two boys and the thought just terrifies you. So, how do you appropriately give back? How do you play your role in this? It is healing."

Tkachuk, who has missed the past three games with what is said to be an illness, was not in Columbus on Tuesday and posted a message through the Panthers' social media channel:

Unfortunately, I won't be there tonight in Columbus. Johnny was a huge part of the hockey community but to me he was much more than that. A great friend, teammate, and family man. Not a day goes by without me thinking about Johnny and Matthew.

The biggest thing I'm going to miss about tonight is not being able to see Meredith, Noa, little Johnny, Guy and Jane. Would love to give them all big hugs! Johnny will be my teammate forever.

Bennett got a little emotional Tuesday when asked if there were times he was feeling a little blue and thought of a funny story involving his friend.

It went back to their days in Calgary when they would be on the road.

Bennett said he and Gaudreau were always two of the last players to hop on the bus, and Gaudreau had an odd pregame ritual.

"He would always eat Raisin Bran cereal," Bennett said, grinning, "but he would always pick out all the raisins.

"I was literally thinking about that today, just him picking raisins out of his cereal. It ended up putting a little smile on my face. I have a million stories, but that's the one I thought of today."

Florida Hockey Now / Florida Panthers to Help Honor Gaudreau Brothers Tonight in Columbus

By George Richards – October 15, 2024

The Blue Jackets play host to the Panthers tonight, but the festive atmosphere will be muted as the team honors the memory of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau before their home opener.

Johnny, 31, and Matthew, 29, died Aug. 29 when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver who has been charged with two counts of death by auto, while riding bicycles near their home in Salem County, New Jersey.

Both teams come into tonight's game feeling good about their respective games; the Blue Jackets went 1-1 on their first road trip, with Florida coming off a 4-3 win in Boston on Monday afternoon.

Yet this day will be about the Gaudreau family and the Panthers are mindful of that.

The hockey will understandably take a back seat.

"Whatever they need," said Florida coach Paul Maurice, whose team will all wear No. 13 on their jerseys during warmups as well as special helmet decals during the game.

"Whatever the fans need, whatever the team needs to start that healing process, we are proud to be a part of it."

On Wednesday morning, Guy Gaudreau — Matthew and Johnny's dad — was back on the ice in a Columbus track suit as new coach Dean Evason ran the morning skate.

Evason, as John Tortorella did in Philadelphia did during training camp, offered an open invitation to Guy to join the team for practices any time he felt like doing so.

A revered youth hockey coach in the Philadelphia area, Guy Gaudreau first joined the Blue Jackets for Monday's practice and was there from start to finish.

Guy Gaudreau left the arena Tuesday morning carrying his stick — and Johnny's 2023 All-Star Game equipment bag from Sunrise.

"It has been great having him here," said former Florida defenseman Erik Gudbranson, who played with Johnny in Calgary and with the Blue Jackets. "He is hurting and sometimes it is hard to find the words to say to him, but just him being around, you find comfort in people.

"If we can provide some of that for the Gaudreau family, being here and being around the rink ... this is what normal is to them. They have been around the rink their whole life. Hopefully they continue to do so. They are a huge part of our group. You try to crack a few jokes to see if you can get him to smile a little bit. Ask him what he thinks. He is a very smart hockey mind. He has seen a lot of my games over the past three years."

The Blue Jackets have left Gaudreau's locker stall empty in their locker room but display his jersey in it for both home and away games.

Evason decided Gaudreau's memory will be with his teammates forever, and they are not trying to move past the tragedy.

Tonight will be just another moment in what has been a long time of mourning, one which will continue.

“We want them to use the emotion, to embrace the emotion,” Evason said. “You are feeling sad, or anything, use it and turn it into a positive emotion moving forward. We have talked about what Johnny would want us to do, and what he would say, and that’s what we’re doing. We’re not afraid of the emotion. If you feel that you need to talk to somebody, or not talk to somebody, maybe let loose, cry, yell, scream, get mad, do it.”

Added defenseman Zach Werenski: “It has been hard to describe; there have been ups-and-downs, good days, bad days, emotional days. I think we have all gone through that together — the conversations in here, the stories and pictures shared. I think the past month-and-a-half has been really good just being around all these guys.”

When news of the death of the Gaudreau brothers became public, Florida forward Matthew Tkachuk put out an emotional post on social media.

The two became close friends in Calgary, and both left the Flames within a few weeks of each other in 2022.

During Florida’s media day before training camp started, Tkachuk said he will continue to smile whenever he thinks of his friend.

“My memories will last forever, but I can’t stop thinking about his parents, about Meredith and the kids,” Tkachuk said.

“It was a very tough time at the wake and at the funeral; it has been a tough few weeks. But I think everyone has done an amazing job of telling stories and keeping him present because that is exactly what he would want, for us to smile about him and tell fun stories about what a great player and teammate he was. But he was a better guy. So, his memory will go on forever. My memories will go on forever.

“I feel like, last year, I was telling a Johnny story to someone every week. So, I am going to continue to do that.”

Gudbranson said he agreed with that thought.

Whenever he starts feeling sad, Gudbranson thinks of something funny that Johnny Gaudreau did and that makes him smile once more.

It is not easy, of that there is no doubt.

“It is awful and it gets you every day and there is something that turns it on every day,” Gudbranson said. “He is supposed to be here. It is a tragic story, really sucks, and you feel for his family; his wife, his kids. We miss him very dearly.”

Tonight, both teams will wear Gaudreau No. 13 jerseys during warmups; they will all be available for auction with all proceeds benefitting the John & Matthew Gaudreau Foundation.