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## The Athletic / 'Minicamp' will allow Rick Bowness to further put his stamp on Blue Jackets

**By Aaron Portzline – February 18, 2026**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Throughout a conversation Tuesday, Columbus Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness repeatedly used the word “camp” to describe what will take place at Nationwide Arena over the next eight days.

The NHL’s Olympic break is still very much in effect, and the regular season doesn’t resume until Feb. 25 for several clubs and Feb. 26 for the Blue Jackets.

But the NHL’s non-Olympians will return to practice Wednesday. With the exception of Zach Werenski (United States) and Elvis Merzlikins (Latvia), who are still in Milan, the Blue Jackets will take the ice at 11 a.m.

It won’t be treated like the end of the break, Bowness said, but the beginning of a second training camp.

“Yeah, it’s a minicamp,” Bowness said. “That’s what it is, and that’s the approach that we’re taking. If you go into this next stretch of this season without every bit of your intensity and energy, you’re making a huge mistake. From here on out, the games are going to get harder. Much harder. We’ve got to use this camp to prepare for it mentally and physically.”

The Blue Jackets’ outlook changed dramatically when Bowness was lured out of retirement to take over behind the bench on Jan. 12. They’ve won 11 of their past 12 games, including a still-alive seven-game win streak, to soar back into the playoff race.

When play resumes, the Blue Jackets, who are in ninth place overall in the Eastern Conference, will sit just 4 points behind the Boston Bruins for the second wild-card spot and just 4 points behind the New York Islanders for third place in the Metropolitan Division, with games in hand on both teams.

Those two opponents — Feb. 26 at Boston and Feb. 28 vs. New York — are the Jackets’ first two games out of the break.

Though a large contingent of players skated on their own in Nationwide Arena on Tuesday, the Blue Jackets’ coaching staff gathered in their offices to fine-tune their systems and map out a schedule for the next eight days.

“We went over everything,” Bowness said. “The specialty teams, the five-on-five plays, both sides of the puck. ... We’ve got a good grasp on where we are right now.”

Bowness said the Blue Jackets will settle into a two-on, one-off schedule leading up to the Feb. 26 game in Boston. The Wednesday-Thursday practices, he said, will be “flow” practices, just getting players acclimated to being back on the ice again.

After an off day Friday, the Saturday and Sunday skates will not be for the faint of heart, he said. Neither will the practice next Tuesday. They will be physically demanding and a challenge for the legs and lungs.

“The third and fourth practices will be a lot more demanding,” Bowness said. “The fifth practice will be demanding, and then we’ll lighten the load before we go to Boston. But those three days are going to be tough practices.”

The reason is twofold. Bowness wants to get them in the right frame of mind to start playing at a playoff-level pace as the season cranks up to its crescendo. Also, the Blue Jackets will need to be physically fit and fully up to speed on how Bowness wants them to play, because there’s virtually no practice time in March.

The postponement of a Jan. 26 game vs. the Los Angeles Kings because of heavy snow and sub-zero temperatures added another game in March. It will be made up on March 9, giving the Jackets 17 games in 30 days.

“It’s unreal,” Bowness said. “There’s only one two-day break (March 15-16) in the whole month. A lot of other teams have 15-16 games. That L.A. game being postponed, that bites us a little bit, but we’ll deal with it the best we can.”

Bowness came to town with plans to make changes to the Blue Jackets’ style of play, their systems and so on. Some of that has already been addressed via video during his first month behind the bench, he said. But the upcoming “camp” will make on-ice training finally possible.

But a strange thing happened while the Blue Jackets were earning 22 of a possible 24 points from Jan. 11 until they last played on Feb. 4. Bowness said he’s wise enough not to change too much.

“We’re feeling better about our game defensively,” he said. “We’re defending better. The minor changes we’ve made, they’ve picked up. Anytime you make changes, it takes time. When I was in Winnipeg, it took me about a year and a half to get them out of playing that 1-1-3.

“We’re not looking to make any major adjustments coming into camp, just fine-tuning. But you have to keep pushing them and giving them the direction you want them to go. We still have a lot of work to do — let’s not kid ourselves.”

Bowness said right winger Kirill Marchenko, who missed the final two games before the break with an illness, may be held out of Wednesday and Thursday practices because of a nagging lower-body injury.

“He’ll be ready to go for Boston,” Bowness said. “That’s all that matters.”

The NHL hasn’t taken a midseason break for the Olympics since 2014. Players scatter all over the globe, with some returning to their homes on the other side of the world, some heading to exotic beaches and others staying home to catch up on rest and sleep.

They’d better take a breath, Bowness said.

“If you’re not beat up this time of year, you’re not playing hard enough,” he said. “This break has been beneficial, I think, for everybody. It’s a break, but most guys worked out on their own. I’m confident our

guys looked after themselves. Some guys kept skating throughout the break, which is great news. They know what's coming, how difficult this stretch is going to be for us.”

## The Hockey Writers / 10 Blue Jackets' Teammate Truths Featuring Charlie Coyle

By Mark Scheig – February 19, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets returned to practice on Wednesday morning in advance of their season resume next Thursday night in Boston. With five more practices coming in the next seven days, the team is preparing for the stretch run still on the outside of the playoff picture.

Today, we are debuting a new feature that is both fun and hopefully informative. It will also allow us the opportunity to see what the players really think about each other.

Our new feature is called 10 Blue Jackets' Teammate Truths. It's a form of which teammate would most likely do what. The rules are pretty simple.

We will go around the Blue Jackets' room and ask the guys the same 10 questions. They can say a player more than once if it applies. These are off the wall, fun and sometimes silly questions that not only lighten the mood but also get to the truth on certain matters.

As we move forward, because it's the same 10 questions, you'll get the chance to see the different answers everyone comes up with to get a sense of who rises to the top with each question. Here's the catch. Each player we speak to CANNOT answer themselves. They must choose a current teammate.

We're going to see how well the guys know each other. Up first for our debut edition of 10 Teammate Truths is Charlie Coyle. He's had a tremendous season centering the Blue Jackets' third line and has helped solidify an important role on the team.

Coyle just played his 1,000th NHL game this season. While he's been in the league a long time, this is his first season with the Blue Jackets. How quickly has he gotten to know his teammates? We're about to find out.

With some questions, a player was named with no explanation. For others, Coyle gave some insight. Many laughs were shared. He also wanted to name Dmitri Voronkov for several of these questions. Without further ado, let's jump in and play 10 Blue Jackets' Teammate Truths.

### **10 Truths: Charlie Coyle**

1. Who is the most forgetful player on the team? Who is the guy most likely to forget something on a road trip or they get to the hotel and realize they forgot something? "Probably, is it bad there's a lot of guys that come to mind? (Laughing) Let me think. I was going to say Voronkov but he is the Russian guy. They're probably going to look after him too. I'm going to go KJ (Kent Johnson). I don't know why but I'm going to go KJ."
2. Who has the best taste in music on the team in which you'd want to hear their playlist? "I don't like a lot of stuff we play. So I know who has not good taste according to me. But I think someone who has similar taste is Erik Gudbranson."

3. Who is the biggest napper on the team plane or bus? "Miles Wood. I sit next to him. He's pretty much always snoozing."
4. Who is most likely to get lost in a hotel or a new city? "Get lost? Hmmm. I was going to go with a Russian again but they stick together. But they could be lost together. I'll go with Voronkov for that."
5. Is there anyone who is the weird hotel room service guy? Strange orders, 2 A.M. deliveries? "I'm going to say Provorov."
6. Who is the biggest chirper on the team? "Gotta be Ollie (Mathieu Olivier). Lives up to it. He can do it."
7. Who is the most serious at the card table? At fantasy football? "I'd say either Gudbranson or Provorov. I'll say Provorov (card table). For fantasy football, I'm trying to think. Gudbranson won. He barely squeaked it out. Who was always trying? I'll go with (Damon) Severson. He was stinking for a while and always trying to make moves."
8. Who is the best & worst at karaoke? "Let's see. Worst is going to be, have to say Voronkov again. (Author's note: Poor Voronkov). Who's got some good pipes? Who could sing? I think Adam Fantilli's got a good voice. He could be a good karaoke guy. (Author's note: Coyle answered this as Fantilli walked right past us.)"
9. Who is the biggest or best debater, the guy that will argue their point and die on that hill? Examples include pineapple on pizza or is a hot dog a sandwich. "Let's see. I would say Gudbranson for that too. He would be pretty stern on what he's (arguing). He's the guy for that."
10. Last one. Who's the most likely to become a TikTok or YouTube star because they fell on the bench or something else silly? "So kind of clumsy? Who's funny? I'm going to go Elvis Merzlikins. Kind of quirky. He'll do something. You never know exactly (what it'll be.)"

## The Athletic / NHL Draft prospect Alberts Šmits turns heads with Olympic men's hockey performance

By Arpon Basu – February 18, 2026

MILAN — Four years ago in Beijing, a teenage prospect arrived on the Olympic stage, took the men's ice hockey tournament by storm and gave a massive boost to his NHL draft stock.

His performance in that Beijing tournament heavily influenced the Montreal Canadiens' decision to draft Juraj Slafkovský with the No. 1 pick at the 2022 NHL Draft. It gave them confidence that a big stage did not scare him and he would not wilt under the pressure, something Slafkovský is showing with Slovakia again at these Olympics.

A similar story might have been written by Latvia's 6-foot-3, 205-pound teenage defenseman Alberts Šmits, the lone draft-eligible player in the Olympic tournament this year.

Šmits' tournament came to an end in the qualifying round Tuesday when Latvia lost 4-1 to Sweden, but the rangy, physical defenseman with excellent hands and feet left an excellent impression on his teammates and anyone who watched him.

Earlier in the tournament, after Latvia faced the United States in the preliminary round, Šmits was asked about the opportunity in front of him to give a Slafkovský-like boost to his draft stock with a strong performance against the best players in the world. He had just come off a loss, but he was able to see the big-picture benefits of his time in Milan.

"Of course it's a great opportunity, a great challenge for me that I'm glad and honored to take, to see myself and see what I need to improve to play against those types of players, the top players in the world," he said on Feb. 12. "It's a big challenge I have for me and for us as a team."

It was a telling sign of his competitive nature that five days later, in the immediate aftermath of his country's elimination, Šmits was unable to see the big picture anymore. He didn't care about his draft stock.

"That's not why I came here," he said Tuesday after the loss to Sweden. "I came here to help my team and do my best to help my country. I didn't come here for the draft rankings."

That may very well be true, but how Šmits is viewed by NHL teams after his performance in a best-on-best tournament can only have improved. He played on his team's top pair, averaged 18:44 of ice time per game and not only did not look out of place, but looked like he belonged just two months after his 18th birthday.

Latvia and Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzljikins is no NHL scout, but when he was asked about the young players on the Latvia roster, he gave a long answer about the poise they played with, how it was impressive for him to watch them face this level of competition and play freely, with little to no nerves, and how it bodes well for the future of Latvian hockey.

But when asked specifically about Šmits, Merzjkins put on his NHL scouting cap.

“I’m definitely, when I get back home I need to talk to Columbus, because that’s what I meant. Mostly, I was talking about him,” he said. “The forwards I really don’t care because they’re not really my job; my closest friends are my defensemen. And him, he played lights out. The kid is really calm, focused, makes decisions quick, physical. Blocking shots, he doesn’t really care about getting hurt or pain or anything. And mentally, he’s really mature as a kid as well.

“It’s exactly him I was talking about. I’m happy and proud of him, and I’m happy that we have this type of player coming up for the future and the next many years for our nation.”

What impressed his veteran teammates the most was how Šmits never backed down despite the quality of opponent he was facing. He was not in awe, he was not intimidated, he just played.

“I’m here to show what I can do on the ice,” Šmits said after the game against the U.S. “I’m here to compete and not to admire other players.”

Šmits demonstrated that most clearly against the Americans when he lined up U.S. captain Auston Matthews and dropped him with a big open-ice hit.

“He has a swagger, and that’s good,” Merzjkins said. “He has a similar character as me. Maybe that’s why I like him, he really doesn’t give a s— who is in front of him, what is the name, it doesn’t matter. He is just going to go cross-check the guy, give it back if he has to, and obviously protect me. He has all good values.

“So again, I seriously have to go talk to Columbus.”

Alberts Šmits is the lone draft-eligible player in the Olympic tournament this year. Gregory Shamus / Getty Images

Our NHL Draft experts Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler both have Šmits in the top 10 of their latest draft rankings; Pronman has him at No. 8, Wheeler at No. 5. The only Latvian to ever be drafted in the first round is Zemgus Girgensons, who was taken by the Buffalo Sabres with the No. 14 pick in 2012. Šmits is all but assured to go higher than Girgensons did, especially after his performance in Milan.

“He’s definitely a very mature kid, definitely the most mature 18-year-old I’ve seen,” Girgensons said. “Great player, great skill, great poise for his age, so I think he’s going to do great things moving forward ... On the ice, I think it’s just poise, his poise with the puck; he can hold on to the puck.

“Usually guys that age try to rush plays and get rid of it; he definitely has the poise with it.”

Latvia captain Kaspars Daugaviņš played 91 games in the NHL, but he was also a third-round pick of the Ottawa Senators in 2006. When Girgensons was taken in the first round, and Teddy Blueger was taken at No. 52 by the Pittsburgh Penguins, it set off a run of five straight years where a Latvian player got drafted.

Daugaviņš hopes Šmits can have a similar effect on Latvia in the coming years.

“It puts the belief in other kids when you have somebody drafted really high,” he said. “First of all, it’s the kids that watch him; they will start believing. But the other thing is hockey will know, like, the scouts. Two or three years ago when we won a bronze medal at the world championships, the scouts in the world start thinking, ‘Oh, these guys know how to play hockey.’

“So the next generations will be seen.”

For now, Šmits is headed back to Jukurit in Finland, a country he moved to on his own at age 13 to further his hockey career and has played in ever since. Wherever he lands in the draft is not his concern right now, and when asked by a Finnish reporter after the loss to Sweden if this would be his final season in Finland, Šmits responded that it was far too early to answer that question.

But as far as Merzlikins is concerned, after what he saw in Milan, it’s not too early at all.

“I think he has a good chance to start playing in the NHL,” he said. “I’ve seen a lot. Obviously I had never seen him on the small ice, but now I think he easily can play.”