



Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips November 26, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets News

- PAGE 2 The Athletic / Back in the NHL, Brendan Smith's debut with Blue Jackets will be a 'pinch me' moment
- PAGE 5 The Columbus Dispatch / 'Banged up' Blue Jackets hopeful Zach Werenski can play through injury
- PAGE 7 TSN / Blue Jackets GM Waddell: Condensed schedule leading to uptick in injuries

Cleveland Monsters / Prospects News

- PAGE 9 Cleveland.com / Blue Jackets bring up forward from Monsters on emergency recall

NHL News

- PAGE 10 The Athletic / NHL 2025-26 attendance check-in: Wild and Blackhawks down, Sharks and Blue Jackets up

Multimedia

The Athletic / Back in the NHL, Brendan Smith's debut with Blue Jackets will be a 'pinch me' moment

By Aaron Portzline – November 26, 2025

On Sunday, NHL veteran defenseman Brendan Smith and his family shared a toast. It was champagne for Brendan and his wife, Samantha, and apple juice for his son, Nolan, 7, and daughter, Ryan, 5.

This was not a pre-Thanksgiving celebration, per se, but it was certainly a celebration of thanks.

For nearly two months, Smith was playing under a professional tryout contract for the Columbus Blue Jackets' AHL affiliate in Cleveland, his 16-year pro career in limbo. Everything changed over the weekend.

The Blue Jackets signed Smith, 36, to a one-year, two-way contract, and he'll make his Columbus debut Wednesday when the Blue Jackets host the Toronto Maple Leafs in Nationwide Arena.

"My little guy (Nolan) took the news pretty hard when I told him that I didn't make Columbus (out of training camp)," Smith said. "He might have taken it harder than I did, and you know — if you're a parent — how tough that is to see your kid like that. I'm trying to console him (laughs), and I'm upset, too.

"Letting (the kids) know what happened now, that Daddy was going to play for the Blue Jackets ... man, it was great. I was like, 'Guys, we have some good news for you.' And it was special, man. It was like Christmas morning."

The Blue Jackets needed a feel-good story Tuesday, especially a string of injuries to some of the franchise's most important players Monday, not to mention their 5-1 drubbing at the hands of the Washington Capitals.

There was at least some good news on the injury front Tuesday.

Zach Werenski, who left Monday's game after two periods with an upper-body injury, is likely to play Wednesday versus the Leafs. An official determination will be made Wednesday morning, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said.

There's less known about forward Kirill Marchenko, who did not dress for Monday's game after suffering a lower-body injury earlier in the day, or forward Mathieu Olivier, who suffered an upper-body injury late in the first period Monday and did not return.

With those two certain to miss Wednesday's game, and with Zach Aston-Reese the only extra forward on the roster, the Blue Jackets on Tuesday recalled winger Luca Pinelli from AHL Cleveland, where he has a team-leading five goals, five assists and 10 points with 18 penalty minutes in 13 games.

Pinelli, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2023, will make his NHL debut.

A roster spot was created for Smith by returning defenseman Dysin Mayo to Cleveland, and Evason made it clear that, even if Werenski can play, Smith will go into the lineup. The best guess is he'll take Jake Christiansen's spot.

What does Smith bring to the lineup that Evason finds so appealing?

"His bite. His leadership. His aggressiveness as a defenseman. His ability to play. A heavier physical game down low in the D-zone," Evason said. "We brought him here for training camp and had a good look at him, and we wanted to see him continue that in Cleveland. And he did."

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said he reached out to Smith and his agent Friday to get the contract talks started. By Sunday, they had a deal.

"With what's going on with us, and what's going on around the league (with injuries), I figured that somebody might come along and sign him," Waddell said. "And if we needed somebody, we'd have to pay a price. So why not see if your own guy, a guy you know well, is willing to sign a contract?"

"What I like about him is he played as hard in Cleveland as he does in the NHL. He didn't take it easy. He practiced hard, trained hard, did everything he could for the team. If you've got that guy in your organization, why not keep him?"

This was music to Smith's ears.

Smith signed a PTO with the Blue Jackets for training camp. He bet on himself, too, moving the family to Columbus, enrolling his kids in school and getting his son started at The Battery Hockey Academy, etc.

He also looked at the Blue Jackets' roster — Waddell made a few offseason moves, especially on defense — and thought he had a shot to finish his NHL career with, as he said, a team "right on the brink" of doing something special.

That's why the news, late in training camp, that he'd been released from his PTO landed so hard.

Smith was already committed to coaching his son's team, and he kept the commitment. But that meant long days driving up and down I-71 so he could practice with the Cleveland Monsters in the morning, coach his son's team and be a father.

"Spending four hours in the car takes away a lot of your day," Smith said. "I'd wake up at 5:45 a.m. in Dublin, be out the door at 6:15 so I could be in Cleveland to work out around 8:15 or 8:20. Then we'd practice in Cleveland, and I'd be out the door headed south.

"Two hours back to Columbus, get there just in time to get the kids and go coach a practice, and then we'd head home, and I'd make dinner. I wouldn't even say I'd make it (awake) to 9:15 p.m. some nights, because I had to be up at 5:45 the next morning."

It wasn't easy, and when Smith spoke to *The Athletic* earlier this month in Cleveland, he acknowledged he wasn't sure how much longer he could do it. But there was something eating at him: He believed he could still play in the NHL.

Smith is three years older than any other player in the Blue Jackets dressing room. With that experience comes wisdom, he said, and it's allowed him to see a positive side to the struggle over the last three months.

It is one thing to tell your kids to be strong, to persevere, to keep battling through the tough times. But it's something else to *show* them.

"You're always trying to teach your kids to never quit," Smith said. "Things aren't always going to go your way. You're going to fall off the horse. Get back on. You're gonna make mistakes. Try again. Usually it works out, but if it doesn't, you did your very best. That's life.

"I'm really glad I was able to see it that way, and recognize the lesson they were maybe getting out of this. I'm proud of that, I really am."

Samantha Smith will have Nolan and Ryan at Nationwide Arena on Wednesday. It will be an emotional night, even though Smith's played 726 games, including 32 last season for the Dallas Stars.

"I remember every first game I've played with every team, and they're all so exciting," Smith said. "This one might be, arguably, up there with my first (NHL) game.

"Just with how this season has gone, how challenging it's been ... when you put all the variables in, this one will be pretty exciting for me. It's gonna be a pinch me moment."

The Columbus Dispatch / 'Banged up' Blue Jackets hopeful Zach Werenski can play through injury

By Brian Hedger – November 25, 2025

An upper-body injury caused Zach Werenski to miss the third period of the Blue Jackets' 5-1 road loss to the Washington Capitals on Nov. 24, but moving forward, the team hopes it is something he can play through.

The star defenseman also missed practice Nov. 25 at Nationwide Arena, but coach Dean Evason thought it possible Werenski would return Nov. 26 against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"He's obviously working through some stuff today, but we'll have a better idea [at the morning skate]," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "I don't know yet what [the diagnosis] is going to be. I won't know, I'll be honest with you, until he tries it on the ice [in the morning]."

Werenski is off to another outstanding season after finishing runner-up for the Norris Trophy, which is awarded annually to the NHL's best defenseman. He's second only to Kirill Marchenko in scoring with 21 points in 23 games (seven goals, 14 assists), and Werenski is averaging 26:26 in ice time. That's nearly on pace with his 26:45 average last season, which led all NHL players.

Werenski plays in all situations, often draws the toughest defensive matchups and has developed into a strong leader as an alternate captain who's unafraid to speak up when needed. Losing him for any length of time would be a big hurdle for the Blue Jackets, who also lost Marchenko and power forward Mathieu Olivier to upper-body injuries in Washington.

All three visited with doctors, while center Sean Monahan missed practice as a maintenance day to deal with his own health issues.

"We had a lot [of injuries] last year, so it was nice to have the same lineup and the same people available," Evason said. "It just seems like this past trip that we got banged up pretty good. I don't know what the reason is. ... It probably has to do with the [NHL's] condensed schedule and travel and all of that, and [playing] lots of hockey games over short periods of time, but it happens. Everybody's going through it."

The Maple Leafs (9-10-3) are one of those teams. They're still missing six lineup regulars, including captain Auston Matthews and goalie Anthony Stolarz.

Prior to their rash of injuries in Washington, the Blue Jackets didn't have captain Boone Jenner (upper body) or alternate captain Erik Gudbranson (hip). Jenner is back to skating on his own and Evason said both are making progress toward returning, but for now the Blue Jackets are dealing with five injured stalwarts.

Werenski might grit through his issue, but it's reasonable to assume he'll be limited while doing it.

“A lot of times, people don’t even know guys are playing through injuries,” defenseman Damon Severson said. “It’s just part of the season. Unfortunately, these are some significant ones that are hitting us right now, so hopefully we can just keep on our track and pick up the slack while we’re missing some guys.”

TSN / Blue Jackets GM Waddell: Condensed schedule leading to uptick in injuries

November 25, 2025

The injuries are beginning to pile up for Don Waddell and the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Star winger Kirill Marchenko picked up an apparent injury during the team's morning skate ahead of Monday's meeting against the Washington Capitals, before Zach Werenski and Mathieu Olivier both made early exits during the contest with a pair of upper-body injuries.

Marchenko and Werenski have played key roles for Columbus this season, and currently lead the team in scoring with 22 and 21 points apiece through the first 23 games of the year.

The Blue Jackets haven't been the only team to struggle with staying healthy while navigating a condensed schedule in the early part of the season, and Waddell cites the lack of downtime for players as a reason for the uptick in injuries.

"I just think the rest for these players is a big factor," Waddell said in an appearance on TSN 1050's First Up Tuesday morning. "We all understand why there's a compressed schedule, everybody's just got to deal with it. Certainly, there's no time for rest and I think that leads to more injuries than normal."

Waddell also revealed that the injuries have also played a part in stalling the trade market while so many team remain in the hunt for the playoffs in the early going.

"There's a lot of talk, but everybody's looking for the same thing: players, because of all of the injuries. You're not at a point where anybody's throwing in the towel and saying, 'Okay we'll take prospects and draft picks'.

"Any discussions you have, it's all about players for players and I think that makes it difficult right now at this time of the year because nobody feels like they can give up too much off their team to get something else unless it's a real big trade.

"I think it's going to be a little bit quiet for a while and when we get through the next few weeks, get into the middle of December, if you start to see some separation in either conference, you could potentially see some teams looking to move some players."

Columbus took three out of a possible eight points from their most recent road trip, and remain on the outside of the playoff picture ahead of American Thanksgiving in what has shaped up to be a highly competitive Eastern Conference.

The Blue Jackets narrowly missed out on the playoffs last season, finishing two points back of the Montreal Canadiens for the final wild card spot in the East during Waddell's first campaign with the team after making the jump from the Carolina Hurricanes in May 2024.

“When you go back the last year, the way we finished was positive and everybody felt that everything that went on with the franchise was successful, and our players didn’t feel that way,” Waddell said. “I can remember being down in the locker room a couple days after the season ended. These guys were truly disappointed and not happy about the end result knowing that it’s an 82-game season and we had a great run at the end of the year.

“To me, that was one of the reasons I didn’t think we needed to tear this thing apart. I think we’ve got some good veteran leadership, got some really good young players. We needed to add a few pieces, we needed a right-hand shot centre, we got Charlie Coyle. We needed some speed, Miles Wood. We added [Isac] Lundestrom, who’s a very defensive-minded, safe forward.

“We didn’t think we needed to make a lot of changes, but we needed to tweak it some. [I] believe in this group, believe that we can get to where our goal is, and that’s to get in the playoffs.”

Columbus is in the midst of a five-year playoff drought, last getting in with a win over the Toronto Maple Leafs in the qualifying round during the 2019-20 COVID-19 bubble playoffs.

On Wednesday, the Blue Jackets return home for a meeting against the slumping Leafs, just six days after earning their lone victory of the road trip in Toronto.

Third-year forward Adam Fantilli netted the overtime winner to cap off a three-point night against the Leafs in the 3-2 victory, continuing a string of strong performances against his hometown team.

Fantilli, a native of Nobleton, Ont., also recorded his first career hat trick in Toronto last January and has averaged a point per game in eight career appearances against the Leafs.

“When you’ve got players that are going into their home city, it can go either way because sometimes it’s the distractions of having your family there, having all of your friends that are trying to see him...and then it can go the way that it’s gone for Adam, where he’s so fired up about going into Toronto being a Toronto kid and following the Maple Leafs growing up.

“For him, and for us, it’s worked out very well and I know he’s always excited about playing the Maple Leafs.”

Waddell, Fantilli, and the Blue Jackets will hope for similar results against Toronto this time around as the Blue Jackets open a two-game homestand to close out the month of November.

[Cleveland.com / Blue Jackets bring up forward from Monsters on emergency recall](#)

November 25, 2025

With the Blue Jackets battling injuries, the team called up forward Luca Pinelli from the Cleveland Monsters on an emergency recall on Tuesday.

Pinelli, 20, leads the Monsters in goals, points and shots on goal this season with five goals and seven assists for 12 points in 16 games since making his professional debut. The forward was selected by Columbus in the fourth round, 114th overall, at the 2023 NHL Draft.

The Blue Jackets have sustained multiple injuries to their forward group in recent days. Kirill Marchenko sat out Monday's 5-1 loss at Washington with a lower-body injury sustained in a morning skate. The team also lost forward Mathieu Olivier and defenseman Zach Werenski to upper body injuries.

Team reporter Jeff Svoboda posted on X that in addition to Marchenko, Olivier and Werenski, center Sean Monahan did not practice on Tuesday ahead of Wednesday night's home game vs. the Maple Leafs.

Pinelli, a Stoney Creek, Ontario, native, spent four seasons with the Ontario Hockey League's Ottawa 67's from 2021 to 2025, accumulating 128 goals and 124 assists for 252 points in 246 games. In his final junior campaign last season, he recorded career highs with 37 goals and 34 assists in 52 games while finishing tied for fifth in the league in power play goals with 15.

At 5-foot-9 and 176 pounds, Pinelli has registered 35 shots on goal through 13 games with Cleveland in the 2025-26 season, ranking second on the team in assists and penalty minutes.

The Athletic / NHL 2025-26 attendance check-in: Wild and Blackhawks down, Sharks and Blue Jackets up

By Harman Dayal and James Mirtle – November 26, 2025

After Tuesday's game in Edmonton, the NHL season is already 360 games old — or just shy of 30 percent of the way through the 2025-26 campaign. The Olympic-year schedule is certainly relentless.

We've now reached U.S. Thanksgiving, one of the big demarcation points on the NHL calendar, which gives us an appropriate number of games to take a snapshot of various trends across the league. Today, we're analyzing attendance, the biggest piece of hockey-related revenue for the 32 teams.

We'll break down these numbers in a couple of ways in this piece. The first separates how close teams are to playing to a full house on a nightly basis so far this season. The second looks at home attendance figures from a similar point last season, allowing for a direct comparison for each franchise. From there, we will be able to see which teams have made the biggest gains and losses year over year.

A few disclaimers:

1. Attendance figures here are from Hockey Reference and include all games played through Saturday, Nov. 22.
2. In the event of a discrepancy in arena capacity size, we went with the official number supplied by a team's media guide or arena website (when available).
3. The Utah Mammoth aren't included as their seating configuration continues to evolve in Year 2 in Salt Lake City, and it wouldn't be an apples-to-apples comparison looking at last year.
4. Two teams (Nashville and Pittsburgh) have played overseas games that technically counted as "home" appearances. We're excluding those games from the average attendance figures.

Tier 1: Guaranteed sellouts

Team	Attendance	Capacity	Capacity %
Vegas	17,907	17,500	102.3%
Boston	17,850	17,565	101.6%
Florida	19,516	19,250	101.4%
Colorado	18,099	18,007	100.5%
Nashville	17,192	17,113	100.5%
Seattle	17,151	17,100	100.3%
Tampa Bay	19,092	19,092	100.0%
Dallas	18,532	18,532	100.0%
New Jersey	16,504	16,514	99.9%
Vancouver	18,833	18,910	99.6%
Edmonton	18,265	18,347	99.6%

Team	Attendance	Capacity	Capacity %
Detroit	19,403	19,515	99.4%
Montreal	20,962	21,105	99.3%
Toronto	18,551	18,800	98.7%
NY Rangers	17,684	18,006	98.2%
Carolina	18,317	18,680	98.1%

Exactly half the league slots in this tier, as 16 teams are hitting 98 percent capacity or higher this season.

This top tier includes a healthy blend of market types: historic Original Six franchises such as Boston, Montreal, Toronto and New York; expansion teams Vegas and Seattle; and contending teams from less traditional markets such as Carolina, Florida, Dallas and Tampa Bay.

The Panthers, in particular, have built strong momentum on the back of their on-ice success. Florida has sold out every home game this season, with average attendance up 12.4 percent compared to this time two years ago.

New Jersey is a new entry into Tier 1, averaging an extra 657 fans per game. The Devils were one of the hottest teams in the NHL in October, which likely fueled this modest growth. It will be fascinating to see whether they can maintain those gains, considering Jack Hughes' recent injury.

Nashville's attendance has remained surprisingly resilient, despite being one of the worst teams in the NHL for a second consecutive year.

Vancouver will be an interesting market to watch moving forward. The Canucks' early attendance has been robust, but apathy is hitting the fan base as the club has plummeted down the standings, with the dark cloud of Quinn Hughes' uncertain future looming. The Canucks have recently offered more discounted "Student Rush" tickets than usual, suggesting demand is starting to soften, even if it hasn't affected attendance totals yet.

The Leafs and Rangers have both seen slight attendance dips (about 200-250 fans per game) in the wake of disappointing starts, but that's small potatoes for these two revenue-generating juggernauts.

Tier 2: Middling showings

Team	Attendance	Capacity	Capacity %
St. Louis	17,673	18,096	97.7%
Washington	17,575	18,506	95.0%
Minnesota	17,018	17,954	94.8%
Columbus	16,995	18,144	93.7%
Winnipeg	14,223	15,325	92.8%
Los Angeles	16,609	18,118	91.7%
NY Islanders	15,658	17,255	90.7%
Anaheim	15,499	17,174	90.2%
Ottawa	16,797	18,652	90.1%

There are both good news and bad news stories in this group. The only four holdovers of the nine teams in this range include the Blues, Capitals, Kings and Ducks, with Anaheim the one team in that group that feels likely to keep rising the longer the season wears on, as they continue to push for their first playoff berth in eight years.

The Blues, meanwhile, have struggled so badly — currently sitting in 29th place — that you wonder if they could slip further from nearly 98 percent capacity as porous goaltending and a lack of offense combine to put their season in jeopardy early.

Quite a few teams moved up to here, with Columbus, Winnipeg, Ottawa and the Islanders all bumping up their early-season sales figures for varying reasons.

The Blue Jackets had a terrific revival last season, narrowly missing the playoffs, and have enough young talent and potential to be a bigger draw than they've been in a while. Winnipeg and Ottawa both had strong regular seasons a year ago, buoying early interest in the two small Canadian markets. There's still more room for those numbers to go up, depending on how their seasons go.

The Islanders, meanwhile, are getting some immediate benefits from the Matthew Schaefer effect. They've been one of the league's biggest and best surprises, sitting in ninth overall, and could make the playoffs thanks to their No. 1 pick leading the way.

The only club to move down into this group is the Wild, who we'll dig into a little more below, given how notable their drop is.

Tier 3: Some empty seats

Team	Attendance	Capacity	Capacity %
Pittsburgh	16,345	18,187	89.9%
Chicago	17,702	19,717	89.8%
Calgary	17,299	19,289	89.7%
San Jose	15,562	17,435	89.3%
Philadelphia	17,248	19,537	88.3%
Buffalo	16,375	19,070	85.9%

The Penguins were one of the biggest attendance fallers last year. That downward pressure has continued, with this marking the first time they've failed to reach 90 percent capacity since we've been writing this attendance tracker.

Pittsburgh's sliding ticket sales aren't overly surprising, considering the club's lack of recent success and high prices. The silver lining is that the numbers are slowly improving — Pittsburgh has hit at least 17,000 fans in all four of its true home games in November, including a couple of sellouts, whereas in October it didn't hit 17,000 even once.

The Blackhawks' drop to this bottom tier is surprising. Last year's lagging ticket sales made sense because of the team's miserable on-ice performance. This season, however, Connor Bedard's supernova

play and the club's competitive record have yet to make a significant dent in Chicago's attendance (more on that later).

The Flyers' 11-7-3 start under Rick Tocchet has them in the thick of the playoff race, but it hasn't made them any more relevant to Philly sports fans. After five consecutive playoff misses, it's going to take longer, sustained success from this rebuild to generate meaningful buzz.

Year-over-year analysis

Compared to this point last season, NHL attendance is close to flat with only a 0.4 percent increase — up 76 fans per game (without Utah's numbers included).

Including the Mammoth selling out their increased capacity at the Delta Center (now 12,748 but projected to get to 17,000 in the coming years due to renovations), the average team is playing to 96 percent capacity, which is slightly higher than historical norms.

Year-over-Year Comparison

Team	Nov. 2024	Nov. 2025	Difference	Team	Nov. 2024	Nov. 2025	Difference
San Jose	13,506	15,562	2,056	Dallas	18,532	18,532	0
Columbus	15,916	16,995	1,079	Detroit	19,410	19,403	-7
Buffalo	15,303	16,375	1,072	Nashville	17,206	17,192	-14
New Jersey	15,847	16,504	657	St. Louis	17,690	17,673	-17
Florida	18,887	19,516	629	Calgary	17,344	17,299	-45
Winnipeg	13,764	14,223	459	Edmonton	18,347	18,265	-82
NY Islanders	15,247	15,658	411	Montreal	21,105	20,962	-143
Washington	17,354	17,575	221	Philadelphia	17,407	17,248	-159
Ottawa	16,607	16,797	190	Toronto	18,765	18,551	-214
Vancouver	18,764	18,833	69	NY Rangers	17,935	17,684	-251
Colorado	18,038	18,099	61	Los Angeles	16,931	16,609	-322
Vegas	17,889	17,907	18	Anaheim	15,852	15,499	-353
Boston	17,850	17,850	0	Carolina	18,736	18,317	-419
Seattle	17,151	17,151	0	Pittsburgh	16,902	16,345	-557
Tampa Bay	19,092	19,092	0	Chicago	18,544	17,702	-842
Dallas	18,532	18,532	0	Minnesota	18,170	17,018	-1,152

Biggest climbers

San Jose Sharks: +2,056 fans/game (15.2 percent increase)

The Sharks have seen the most significant increase in early attendance of any team in the NHL, and it's not even close.

Last year, San Jose drew meager crowds of 10,000-11,200 during seven of its first 13 home games. They were the only team in the NHL selling at less than 80 percent of its capacity at the quarter mark of the

2024-25 season. This year, though, the SAP Center has yet to dip below 12,000 fans for a Sharks game and has had several sellouts.

Macklin Celebrini's immediate ascent as a 19-year-old superstar is likely the biggest catalyst for these improved numbers. It was a bit unusual that the Sharks didn't get an immediate attendance bump last season from the excitement and hype of having an 18-year-old No. 1 overall pick. There's likely a catch-up effect now that Celebrini has firmly established himself as a must-see player.

The Sharks are genuinely entertaining to watch, and at 11-9-3, they're way more competitive than anybody could have imagined. All of these factors have led to this surge, though there's still plenty of room for improvement, as San Jose is still filling slightly less than 90 percent of its capacity.

Columbus Blue Jackets: +1,079 fans/game (6.8 percent increase)

It hasn't earned them a playoff spot yet, but since last year, the Blue Jackets have quietly been one of the most fun, dynamic teams to watch in the league. Columbus was one of the highest-scoring teams in the NHL last season, on the back of breakout performances from several key young players.

That optimism and an entertaining run-and-gun playing style have fueled a significant jump in attendance this season. Columbus was filling just 87.7 percent of its seats in the early part of the 2024-25 season, ranking third-lowest in the NHL. The Blue Jackets have since climbed to 93.7 percent, which is right around league average.

Zach Werenski and Kirill Marchenko deserve credit as well because their emergence as elite game-breakers has made them worth the price of admission alone.

Buffalo Sabres: +1,072 fans/game (7 percent increase)

This one honestly surprised us. The Sabres are on pace for their 15th consecutive playoff miss ... and yet their attendance has gone up?

It's worth mentioning that even with this first-quarter increase, they're still only filling 85.9 percent of capacity, which is the worst mark in the NHL. In other words, they've improved, but their overall crowd sizes are still pretty lousy.

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The Sabres have made some changes to their ticket sales strategy, which could be boosting these numbers. For example, Buffalo included free tickets to its home opener with any five- or 10-game pack purchased by fans, which helped make the home opener a sellout. The organization also parted ways with its vice president of ticket sales and service just before the season started.

This may also be a situation where the Sabres have been bad for so long that anyone who's still stuck around engaging with the team and going to games is unlikely to tune out despite another mediocre start.

Biggest declines

Minnesota Wild: -1,152 fans/game (6.3 percent decrease)

Fans aren't attending games in the State of Hockey? What's going on?

Historically, the Wild have made headlines more for their long sellout streaks than anything else attendance-wise, but that very well could change this season. Minnesota was absolutely brutal out of the gate — winning just five of its first 15 games and getting booed off the ice at home — and is now on pace for its lowest attendance figure ever.

They have caught fire on the ice lately (7-0-1), which should help ease the fans' base-level angst, but the bigger issue for the Wild is likely a deeper malaise over the team's inability to make inroads as a Western Conference contender for many years. Minnesota hasn't won a playoff round in more than a decade now, going through five head coaches and turning over the entire roster save for veteran defensemen Jared Spurgeon and Jonas Brodin.

Wild tickets are not cheap and there's a lot of competition in the market with the NFL, NBA and MLB and college sports all having a strong presence. They do have a decent youth movement coming and some star talent in Kirill Kaprizov, Brock Faber and Matt Boldy, but you can't blame a fan base for wanting more wins when it counts. And those can only come in April.

Chicago Blackhawks: -842 fans/game (4.5 percent decrease)

The young, plucky Blackhawks have been another of the NHL's good news stories on the ice, as even with a recent mini-skid (three straight regulation losses), they're well ahead of where most projected they'd be in Year 3 of Connor Bedard. They've also been loads more fun to watch, leaping up into a tie for ninth in goals per game after finishing near the league basement in that department last season.

The Athletic's wonderful Scott Powers had a deeper look at the issue. Since that point, they've packed the house a few times — including more than 20,000 fans at games against the Leafs and Avs — driving their average up nearly 1,000 fans a game on the year.

Chicago's a great hockey town and obviously packed the (massive) United Center in the past when they had success. It certainly feels like Bedard's recent heroics — and a potential scoring race chase with fellow wunderkind Celebrini — will bring out more Chicagoans the rest of the way. Our guess is they won't be on this list much longer.