



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
December 18, 2024**

Columbus Blue Jackets

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[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets fall 5-3 to Tampa Bay Lightning for fifth straight loss](#)

By Brian Hedger – December 18, 2024

Despite making a late push against the Tampa Bay Lightning on Tuesday night, the Blue Jackets couldn't overcome a large deficit in their fifth straight loss.

Mikael Pyyhtia and Adam Fantilli scored back-to-back goals for the Blue Jackets early in the third period, pulling their reeling team within two goals, but the Tampa Bay Lightning still had plenty of cushion for a 5-3 victory at Amalie Arena. The Blue Jackets (12-15-5) haven't won in five straight games (0-3-2) and have just one win in their past nine during a 1-6-2 stretch that's quickly starting to undo much of their encouraging start.

Rookie goalie Jet Greaves (27 saves) got back in the Columbus net and took the loss while making numerous key stops in the first two periods to keep the score somewhat respectable under siege.

Luke Glendening, Nick Paul, Jake Guentzel and Mitchell Chaffee all scored goals in the first two periods for the Lightning (17-10-2), who started the third with a 4-0 lead. Tampa Bay dominated the first 40 minutes but backed off a bit in the third while the Blue Jackets continued to push. Pyyhtia and Fantilli got it started with goals on successive shifts against Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy before Cole Sillinger's power-play goal cut it to 4-3 with 5:49 left to play.

The Lightning jumped out to a 1-0 lead in the first period on Glendening's goal, which he scored just 3:21 into the game. It turned out to be the only goal of the opening period for either team, which was a testament to how sharp Greaves was in the Blue Jackets' net.

Tampa Bay outshot Columbus 10-5 in the first, and most of those shots were off quality looks that Greaves stopped with an impressive display of puck-tracking, athleticism, coordination and anticipation. At the other end, the Blue Jackets barely made Vasilevskiy break a sweat.

In the second, the Lightning blew it open by doing what most teams have done against the Blue Jackets in the middle period for three-plus years. They continued dominating possession and it led to goals by Paul, Guentzel and Chaffee that gave Tampa Bay a 4-0 lead.

The Blue Jackets, meanwhile, went into the second intermission angry and reeling from more than just goals allowed. Dante Fabbro, Zach Werenski's partner on the top defense pairing, was knocked out of the game in the second period with a right knee injury after an ugly knee-on-knee hit by Conor Geekie, and it fueled the Jackets' undoing.

Regardless of intention, that hit drew a fiery response from Sillinger, who grabbed Geekie near the Columbus bench during a later shift and began firing punches while players from both teams converged for a pile of bodies.

Sillinger was penalized two minutes for instigating, five minutes for fighting and given a 10-minute misconduct that resulted in the Lightning getting a five-minute power play. Chaffee capped it with 25 seconds left in the man-advantage to give Tampa Bay a four-goal lead on what turned out to be the deciding goal. Next up for the Blue Jackets is yet another daunting matchup Thursday at home against the New Jersey Devils, who started Tuesday one point out of first in the Metropolitan Division.

[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets overmatched against Tampa Bay Lightning: 3 takeaways](#)

By Brian Hedger – December 18, 2024

They've entered the vortex again.

If any of what the Blue Jackets are experiencing amid a frustrating 1-6-2 spin cycle that includes a humbling 5-3 loss Tuesday at the Tampa Bay Lightning, there's a good reason. We've seen this movie before in Columbus and it doesn't end well. In fact, it's not even the first of the season. They also went six games without a win in November before righting the ship with wins in six of their next eight.

It was even worse the past three seasons.

Going back to November 2021, the Jackets began a 6-16-1 tailspin that lasted two months and quickly eliminated them from playoff contention during former coach Brad Larsen's first of two seasons running the bench. A year later, the Jackets stumbled to a 3-9-0 start that sank that season before a ceaseless rash of injuries dropped them to the bottom of the league.

Last season, following the Mike Babcock debacle, the Blue Jackets went 1-9-4 from Oct. 24 to Nov. 19 under replacement coach Pascal Vincent, which ultimately led to him, former general manager Jarmo Kekalainen and former president of hockey operations John Davidson all being replaced.

Now Dean Evason is experiencing the Blue Jackets' vortex, and this one is every bit as ugly as the previous four.

Bad starts, rough second periods, long stretches played without the puck, injuries piling up, entire shifts spent defending, mind-boggling decisions at the most inopportune times ... and this time we've even got a goaltending competition thrown into it.

Happy holidays?

Here are three takeaways from Tuesday's loss in Tampa:

Good starts are a thing of the past for the Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets' ability to start games on the right foot has disappeared since jumping out to a 12-6 shots advantage in the first period Dec. 8 in Winnipeg. That was 10 days ago and feels like two months after what's happened in five games since.

Following the Blue Jackets' impressive 4-1 victory over the Winnipeg Jets in that game, they've had play dictated to them way too often in losses to the Philadelphia Flyers, Washington Capitals (overtime), Anaheim Ducks (overtime), Carolina Hurricanes and Lightning. The second period has frustrated the Blue Jackets for three-plus years and that trend continues, but their recent dip in the first period has become a much bigger concern.

It's one thing to have games slip away with an injury-depleted team struggling to exit its own zone during a period with long-distance changes, but trailing to start that period is immensely worse – which the Blue Jackets are learning the hard way. The Lightning's three-goal second wasn't anything new for the Jackets but having a more experienced team dominate the first 20 minutes, again, is worrisome to say the least.

Clawing back with three goals in the third was commendable, but the Lightning also took their foot off the gas pedal, collectively speaking, while starting the frame up 4-0. The Blue Jackets' challenge going forward is figuring out how to play like that when the game's still 0-0 and opponents have the pedal floored.

More than one-third of the way into the season, other teams are shifting into higher gears as they bring more defensive intensity while chasing playoff spots. Until they prove otherwise, with a handful of key players still out, it's starting to look like the Blue Jackets don't have enough gears to match.

Another game, another Columbus Blue Jackets injury

After defenseman Jack Johnson and forward Kevin Labanc left the Blue Jackets' loss Sunday against the Hurricanes with facial injuries, it was encouraging to see neither requires injured reserve. Not yet anyway.

Johnson has an eye injury after being struck with a stick blade, so stay tuned on that one. He was replaced in Tampa by Jordan Harris, but Labanc played against the Lightning after sustaining a cut against the Hurricanes after being struck by the puck. The Blue Jackets are also playing without captain Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery), Yegor Chinakhov (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery) and Justin Danforth (lower body).

Now add defenseman Dante Fabbro to the list.

Zach Werenski's partner on the top defense pairing left the ice unable to put weight on his right leg after a knee-on-knee hit delivered by Lightning forward Conor Geekie – whose open-ice check in the second period prompted the injury and Cole Sillinger's ill-advised, fiery response.

Fabbro was ruled out before the period even concluded, which could be an early indication that he's going to miss time. If so, the Blue Jackets may need to recall a replacement from AHL Cleveland before facing the Devils on Thursday.

Jet Greaves is currently the Blue Jackets' top goalie

It might only last a little while, but Jet Greaves has a hot hand in net and the starter's role.

Elvis Merzlikins didn't play poorly Sunday, but that start was more of a backup obligation to conclude the Jackets' back-to-back that Greaves began Saturday against Anaheim. Going back to Greaves against the Lightning on the road felt like an indication of how Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason and his staff see things.

Greaves, who made numerous key saves Tuesday to keep the Lightning from turning the game into a laugher, is the Blue Jackets' most consistent goalie right now. What that means for Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov is that both may have to wait for another opportunity to handle that role themselves.

Tarasov, who has struggled all season, could wind up on waivers if the Blue Jackets need a roster spot and accept the risk of losing him via NHL waivers.

The Columbus Dispatch / The (sometimes crazy) history of Columbus Blue Jackets captains

By Michael Arace – December 18, 2024

Coming out of the 2023-24 season, the Blue Jackets had the worst all-time points percentage in NHL history: 767 wins, 827 losses, 33 ties, 187 overtime losses, .483 points percentage. Yet, there have been some high points. They'll always have 2018.

The Jackets have had a Rocket Richard Trophy winner in Rick Nash, Calder Trophy winner in Steve Mason, a two-time Vezina Trophy winner in Sergei Bobrovsky, a Coach of the Year winner in John Tortorella and a King Clancy Memorial Trophy-Mark Messier Leadership Award double winner in Nick Foligno. They've had a handful of All-Stars.

Among the more exclusive clubs in the two-plus decades of franchise history – the captain's club. Seven men have carried the flag, which, as it turned out, is a good way to get traded. Here are their stories (in thumbnail):

Lyle Odelein (2000-02)

Odelein, a veteran defenseman, won a Stanley Cup with the Montreal Canadiens in 1993. He was exposed in the 2000 expansion draft by the New Jersey Devils and selected by the Jackets. He was the Jackets' first signing of the summer free-agent season (goaltender Ronald Tugnutt was the second). He was named captain at the end of the inaugural training camp.

Odelein's efforts at team building were sometimes focused on nighttime activities. Ultimately, he did something that so alarmed management that he was shipped off to Chicago at the trade deadline in 2002. (One of Doug MacLean's better deals: In return for Odelein, the Jackets got defenseman Jaroslav Spacek, a stalwart of the early years, and the second-round pick they used to draft Dan Fritsche.)

Odelein played 146 games in the Union Blue. He had five goals, 33 points and 207 PIMS. In his second return to Nationwide, he was asked to drop the gloves. He graciously acceded and squared off with Jody Shelley.

Ray Whitney (2002-03)

Another of MacLean's better trades: Whitney was acquired from Florida for Kevyn Adams – who was a beloved Original Jacket, but no Wizard. Whitney was the Jackets' second All-Star (after Espen Knutsen) and he set early franchise records for points in a season (61 in 2001-02 and 76 in 2002-03).

A diminutive winger who was a playmaker extraordinaire, Whitney was named captain at the start of the 2002-03 seasons. He had 140 points in 151 games with the Jackets. He and his wife were big fans of Columbus – they lived at the corner of 3rd and Sycamore in German Village – and had a notion to hang around.

As Whitney inched closer toward free agency, he sought a four-year extension, but MacLean wouldn't budge off a three-year term. Whitney opted for free agency. He played 11 more years and, over that post-Columbus span, racked up 1,064 points in 1,330 games.

Luke Richardson (2003-05)

While there is at least one exception, the general rule is it's not easy being captain of the Blue Jackets. In the early days, the job was akin to conducting the orchestra aboard the Titanic.

When defenseman Luke Richardson was named captain ahead of training camp in 2003, he became the third captain under the first coach, Dave King. A few months later, King was gone. MacLean wasn't happy with the rate of progress so he fired King and made himself coach. (MacLean lasted 79 games as coach before he asked himself to step down in order to devote more time to his duties as GM and president. His record behind the Jackets' bench was 24-43-12).

Gerard Gallant had the "interim" tag removed in the summer of 2004 and Richardson had his third coach in fewer than 12 months as captain. (That record would be broken by Boone Jenner.)

On Nov. 29, 2005, Richardson, among the most solid human beings you'll ever meet, removed the "C" from his chest after he was made a healthy scratch at the tail end of a seven-game losing streak. MacLean called it "an unbelievably positive experience."

Four months later, Richardson was traded to the Toronto Maple Leafs for a conditional draft pick at the trade deadline. With that, Upper Arlington High School's lacrosse team lost a prominent volunteer assistant.

Adam Foote (2005-08)

Foote was a high-profile free-agent signing in the summer of 2005. His captaincy coupled the end of the MacLean era and the beginning of the Scott Howson era. His stay in the Arch City did not end well.

At some point, Foote figured out that he didn't want to play anywhere other than Denver, where he spent the first 14 years of his NHL career. Over the years, there has been much in the way of reinterpreting the history of l'affaire Foote. What is clear is that Foote, his agent and Colorado's management made sure that Foote got exactly what he wanted.

A private jet was parked at Port Columbus (now John Glenn International) airport for more than 24 hours before the trade deadline. This was Foote's ride, and it got him to Calgary in time to play for the Avalanche against the Flames just a few hours after the deadline. Then-Calgary coach Mike Keenan told a Dispatch reporter that Foote's new Avalanche equipment had been delivered to the Saddledome a week before Foote got there.

Colorado, which somehow avoided tampering charges, sent a first- and a fourth-round pick to Columbus for Foote. The first-round pick was traded to Philadelphia in a deal to acquire forward R.J. Umberger. The Flyers used the pick, the 19th overall, to select defenseman Luca Sbisa in the 2008 draft.

Rick Nash (2008-12)

After four captains who felt like placeholders, Nash became the Jackets' first true-blue captain. Fourteen years later, Nash's No. 61 was lifted to the rafters of Nationwide Arena.

MacLean had traded up to make sure Nash was the No. 1 overall pick in the 2002 draft. During his nine seasons in Columbus, Nash set franchise career records that still stand: goals (715), assists (258), points (547), power-play goals (83), game-winning goals (44), and so on.

He shared the Rocket Richard Trophy with Jarom Iginla and Ilya Kovalchuk when he scored 41 goals in in 2003-04. He scored the goal that clinched the Jackets' first playoff appearance in 2009. And so on.

Nash was happy in Columbus. The problem was the Jackets only made the playoffs once while he was here. He made the decision that he needed to be traded for two reasons: For him to land with a winner and have a shot at winning the Stanley Cup; for the Jackets to get a haul of players in the deal and

improve their lot. It was an emotional time for everyone involved, especially the Jackets fans who knew him as the face of the franchise.

After months of intrigue, Howson traded Nash to the New York Rangers in the summer of 2012. In return, the Jackets received centers Brandon Dubinski and Artem Anisimov, defenseman Tim Erixon and a first-round draft pick. The pick turned out to be the 19th overall in 2014, and with it the Jackets selected forward Kerby Rychel.

Nash maintained a home in Columbus for the rest of his playing career. Upon retirement, he joined the Jackets' front office. He was named director of hockey operations in September 2024.

Nick Foligno (2015-21)

The Jackets went without a captain, and often rotated alternates, for three seasons after Nash's departure. Foligno was named captain on May 20, 2015. Five months later, John Tortorella arrived to replace Todd Richards as coach. It was a fruitful relationship.

The Jackets posted a 243-147-15 record and made four playoff appearances over the five full seasons with Foligno as captain.

As GM Jarmo Kekalainen looked to rebuild (or "reset"), Foligno was moved at the 2021 trade deadline to Toronto in a three-way deal. The Jackets' return was a first- and a fourth-round pick. The first rounder (25th overall) was used to take defenseman Corson Ceulemans.

Foligno ranks fourth in franchise history in games played (599), goals (142), assists (192) and points (344).

On Sept. 18, 2024, Foligno was named captain of the Chicago Blackhawks.

Boone Jenner (2021-)

Jenner was given the "C" prior to the 2021-22 season. In his first three seasons as captain, he has seen three coaches (Brad Larsen, Mike Babcock, Pascal Vincent) and one GM (Kekalainen) fired. The Jackets were 98-129-28 during this span.

That the locker room remained tight-knit and not prone to mutiny is a credit to Jenner's leadership. The public took greater note of his quality in aftermath of the death of Johnny Gaudreau prior to training camp in 2024, when Jenner was a paragon of class and dignity amid unspeakable grief.

On the eve of the 2024-25 season, Jenner injured his shoulder. Surgery was required. When he went on the shelf for a monthslong stay, he was the franchise leader in games played (715, or 41 more than Nash) and ranked among the Jackets' top three in goals, points, and game-winning goals.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets can't overcome another lousy start, lose Dante Fabbro to injury

By Aaron Portzline – December 17, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets were so angered and bewildered by their latest sleepy start that a furious finish — and an “almost” comeback against the Tampa Bay Lightning on Tuesday — wasn’t nearly enough to make them feel any better.

Mikael Pyyhtiä, Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger scored third-period goals to turn a 4-0 blowout into a one-goal nail-biter late in the third period, but the Blue Jackets were quite capable of digging out of the hole they dug in the first 40 minutes.

The Lightning scored an empty net goal with 2:09 remaining to cap the scoring on a 5-3 win before 19,092 in Amalie Arena, continuing a Blue Jackets slide that stands at 1-6-2 since Dec. 1.

“We were very frustrated after two (periods) with the way we were competing, the way we were battling, the way we were soft,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Tampa, Fla. “It looked like we were intimidated for whatever reason. Yeah, in the third period ... it’s easy to respond when you get into a situation like that and you get prodded a little bit.”

Asked what prompted the third-period push, Fantilli was even more blunt.

“Being down 4-0 ... it’s kind of embarrassing,” he said.

The result wasn’t the Blue Jackets’ only loss in the game.

At 3:08 of the second period, Tampa Bay’s Conor Geekie slammed into Blue Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro with a knee-on-knee hit that led to Fabbro’s writhing on the ice, clutching his right knee. He needed help getting off the ice — Zach Werenski guided him toward the bench — and he did not return.

The Blue Jackets did not offer an update on Fabbro after the game, but it didn’t look good.

Geekie was initially called for a major penalty (kneeing), but after a quick review, the penalty was reduced to a minor penalty. Replays showed Geekie did not extend his knee to make contact, but it also showed Fabbro's right leg whipping back awkwardly.

Evason did not agree with the call.

"The hit is terrible," Evason said. "It's terrible. It's not a hockey play. We've got a guy who's laying on the table right now. It's unfortunate."

About six minutes later, Sillinger came from the other side of the rink — his gloves flying off his hands along the way — to confront Geekie in front of the Blue Jackets bench. Geekie fell quickly to the ice, but a scrum formed between the two teams.

"As a group, we didn't like the hit on Fabs," Sillinger said. "He didn't return to the game. I was kind of seeing red a little bit.

"Maybe it put our team in jeopardy (with the ensuing penalties). You don't want to take a five-minute penalty and get scored on it. That one's on me for that. But you want to stick up for your teammates."

Sillinger was given two for roughing, five for fighting and a 10-minute penalty for instigating. It landed the Blue Jackets on a five-minute penalty kill, and they managed to kill 4:25 of it before the Lightning scored to take a 4-0 lead.

Evason's thoughts: "(Sillinger) did the right thing. For sure, our group stuck together."

Fabbro was a waiver claim from the Nashville Predators on Nov. 10, but he has taken on a massive role with the Blue Jackets, playing on the right side of Werenski on the club's No. 1 pair. He's been a steady, conservative player, allowing Werenski — off to the best start of his career — to be aggressive offensively.

The Blue Jackets, for a second straight game, played the majority of the night with only five defensemen. (Jack Johnson took a high stick to the eye Sunday at the Carolina Panthers.)

But that was only part of the reason the Blue Jackets' third-period uprising was so unexpected. For the first 40 minutes, they just weren't engaged. Their skating looked slow next to the Lightning, their puck battles were half-hearted and so on.

"Are we happy with the response?" Evason said. "Absolutely. We don't question how hard our group is trying to work. But for two periods ... there's no reason you don't start that way. The frustrating part is that we know we can do it, but we're not doing it on a consistent basis."

At 7:23 of the third, Pyyhtiä scored a short-handed goal after Sean Kuraly jumped on an uncharacteristic turnover by Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman and fed the young Finn for a clean look on goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy.

Only 42 seconds later, the Jackets got behind the Lightning defense again, this time on a three-on-one. Fantilli, who has been cold offensively in recent weeks, scored on a wrister from the high slot to make it 4-2.

The most impressive goal — one of the best goals the Jackets have scored this season — was a power-play goal by Sillinger at 14:11. Kirill Marchenko fell while playing the puck in the corner, but managed to sweep the puck toward the slot off his backhand as he tumbled.

The puck was right on Dmitri Voronkov's tape, but he had his back to the net and a Lightning player draped upon him. His only play was a nifty one-touch back to Sillinger, who snapped off a wrister that beat Vasilevskiy to the top right corner of the cage.

It was 4-3, and Amalie Arena fell quiet. It was beginning to look a lot like the meeting between the two clubs in Columbus on Nov. 21, when the Lightning took a 3-0 lead in the first period but allowed the Jackets to rally for a 7-6 overtime win.

But this time the Jackets couldn't get there. Brayden Point's empty net goal extinguished the rally.

"For the last couple of games, our starts haven't been where they need to be, or even close to where they need to be," Sillinger said. "When we start behind the eight ball, it's not ideal.

"We have to play a full 60, and you can't play a full 60 if you don't start when the puck drops."

[The Athletic / What do NHL scouts think of the Blue Jackets' top young players?](#)

By Aaron Portzline – December 17, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets fans could use some good news right about now.

The Blue Jackets are in their second swoon of the season, a 1-5-2 tailspin since Dec. 1, including a 4-1 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes on Sunday. Earlier this season, they endured an 0-5-1 wipeout that erased a surprisingly strong start.

Remember, now, this Blue Jackets season was never supposed to be about the standings.

The fact that Columbus is still only three points out of the final wild-card spot is amazing. It's a testament to their mostly competitive (if inconsistent) play under first-year coach Dean Evason, but also proof that the Eastern Conference is a muddled mess.

The determinant of success this season was always going to be the development of their young players, their reward for missing the playoffs the past four seasons and loading up on first-round draft picks. In that sense, the 2024-25 season has been quite positive in Columbus.

The Athletic spent a couple of days last week speaking with three pro scouts for NHL clubs to get their insights on the Blue Jackets' top young players, the forwards who are already in the NHL — Yegor Chinakhov, Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Kirill Marchenko, Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov — and a defenseman, Denton Mateychuk, who won't be in the minor leagues much longer.

We wanted to know what a pro scout sees when they watch the young Blue Jackets play: not just their attributes, but the areas that need improvement or persist as questions. We also asked them for NHL comparables, which really twisted some of the scouts in knots.

The scouts — one each from the Atlantic, Central and Metropolitan divisions, were granted anonymity so that they could speak freely about another club's players. Here's what they had to say (players listed alphabetically):

Yegor Chinakhov

Position: LW/RW

Age: 23

Career: 166 games, 34-36-70

This season: 21 games, 7-7-14

Scout No. 1

Plus: "There aren't many players with a shot like his — legitimately a 95-to-100 mile-per-hour wrist shot — who can skate like he does. If there's an NHL combine for skill, he's right there."

Minus: "Well, I'm worried about him staying healthy. He has a history now of missing games. What I think is going to determine if he's a 20-goal guy or a 30-plus goal guy is if he can learn to process the game more offensive and make plays. Right now, most of what he does is off the rush."

Comparable: "Michael Grabner, but Grabner couldn't shoot the puck like Chinakhov does. Usually young players with so much speed don't develop an elite shot."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "His skating is fine for me. I don't think it's special like some other guys do, but he's above average. The shot is special. Great release and a heavy shot."

Minus: "Does he have second-line potential? Maybe. But I see him as a third-line guy. I saw him higher originally, but I don't know if he's going to get there. He hasn't stayed healthy, and even when he's healthy he struggles to put it together day in and day out."

Comparable: "That's a tough one for me. Can't think of one."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "His all-around game has grown tremendously. I haven't noticed him as much as I have some of their other guys, but when he's going, he's really hard to miss. He can just pull away from guys with his skating. He gets big gaps because of that wide speed."

Minus: "He needs to play with pace, but he doesn't always. You can see in the first couple of shifts if he's going. But it's not always there, is it? When he doesn't have the puck a lot, he loses engagement."

Comparable: "Michael Grabner, in so many ways."

Adam Fantilli

Position: C

Age: 20

Career: 80 games, 17-23-40

This season: 31 games, 5-8-13

Scout No. 1

Plus: "He has that fiery temperament and the size to really make an impact, but he's also got that attitude where he really wants to beat you. That might be his best quality. He wants to be the guy. There are a lot of skilled players who don't have that."

Minus: "It's getting fed to him right now. You see times when he gets diced up by a good player, but look at his matchups. He's not on a third line, getting protected. He's going up against eight-, 10-, 12-year vets. You're going to get exposed."

Comparable: "He's going to be a two-way center. I don't want to put another name on it."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "His compete level is off the charts. He's frustrated offensively right now, but that's going to come. He can shoot, he can pass ... he can play anyway you want to play. I remember telling a (Blue Jackets) scout at that (2023) draft, 'If Fantilli falls to you (at No. 3), that'll be a great day.'"

Minus: "The defensive zone is a struggle. It's getting better, and it'll continue to grow."

Comparable: "He reminds me of Anze Kopitar. Big, competitive, strong. He can create and finish."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "I like the compete and the will to win. That's something you can't teach. He doesn't have the skill that (Kent) Johnson does — who does? — but he has skill and he has that edge to his game that's special. That's his best asset, and because of that, he's a leader."

Minus: "Everything happens so quick and it's not college hockey anymore. It's such a big jump without the puck. We're seeing that with him now. He's learning it and he'll get better at it. You can fall asleep in college and they probably don't score. You can't do that in the NHL."

Comparable: "Honestly, I would compare him to Boone Jenner, but with more skill."

Kent Johnson

Position: LW/RW

Age: 22

Career: 147 games, 31-46-77

This season: 17 games, 9-9-18

Scout No. 1

Plus: "He has all of the offensive IQ. The skill ... it's just overwhelming. He's so elusive, so slippery. Guys think they have him in a good spot, but he finds a different angle or a space nobody else could see and he finds wiggle room there. He's really good at dodging big hits, too."

Minus: "He's definitely put in the work to get much stronger despite being a wiry guy. But can he get harder on the puck? Can he play on the inside in big games, playoff games? Will you still want him on your team in the third round of the playoffs?"

Comparable: "I can see Ales Hemsky in his prime. Playmaking winger. But I'd put him a notch above Hemsky. I think he'll produce more."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "This kid. I want to know what he did this summer. He certainly committed to being in the best shape ever. He's stronger. He's figured out that he has to play a three-zone game. Evason is really going to help him. His ability to gain the zone and hold on to pucks is impressive. I wrote very few positive reports about him until this year."

Minus: "This is nit-picking, but his defensive-zone play can get better. It already has, but..."

Comparable: "I'm passing on this one, too. I don't think we know yet. I don't rule out him playing in the middle at some point, to be honest."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "He's a totally different player. He either discovered a miracle over the summer or Dean Evason is a genius. He's done a total 180. I could read you my reports from college saying, 'This kid is never going to make it.' That has changed. He could be an All-Star the way he's playing."

Minus: "His defense. Just make it so you're not a liability. You can be a little bit of a liability, but five-on-five, be decent."

Comparable: "He's changed his game so much ... I'm not there yet."

Kirill Marchenko

Position: RW

Age:24

Career: 168 games, 55-41-96

This season: 31 games, 11-18-29

Scout No. 1

Plus: "Shooter. Scorer. Big lanky guy who can really score. Average skater. Good hands. Knows where to go and gets it off in a hurry. I think he's hanging on to pucks longer now."

Minus: "If he wasn't scoring, he'd disappear in games. He needs secondary element to his game, some way to impact a game when he's not on the scoresheet."

Comparable: "Man, this one's tough. I can see a right-shot (Adrian) Kempe, but he doesn't move as well."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "He's a game-breaker for me. Playmakers would love this guy because his stick is always on the ice, and the puck's not on his stick long. He's a top-six player. He'll score between 30 to 40 goals at some point."

Minus: "He still needs to learn how to play in the defensive zone, but it's better. A guy that size ... you want him to be harder to play against, but he doesn't have that attitude."

Comparable: "I hate these (laughs). He doesn't play like most of the guys who are built like him."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "I like him. He's a bull in a china shop. He can beat goalies from distance, but he's not afraid of the dirty areas. He'll go there. He doesn't always hang around, but he'll go there. He's turned into a very good top-six winger. His details have gotten better (under Evason)."

Minus: "I don't think he realizes that he could do more with his size. He's a big guy. I do think he's gotten harder on pucks — more firm, maybe, is the way to put it. But you want more."

Comparable: "I'm trying not to say Chris Kreider, because Kreider's a better goal-scorer. But that's close."

Denton Mateychuk

Position: Defense

Age: 20

Career: Has not played in the NHL yet

This season: 25 games, 7-16-23 (with AHL Cleveland)

Scout No. 1

Plus: "This guy can really dance. This guy is smooth. He can pull people to him and move pucks. He has that 'it' factor that allows an undersize player to be an impact guy. He always balanced. His feet are always under him. He makes it look easy, but let him grow in the AHL. Please don't rush him."

Minus: "Can he produce? Can he be a half-point-a-game guy and run the power play? I'm not sold on it, but he's right there. He's going to play in a lot of games in the NHL."

Comparable: "Wade Redden. Maybe Brian Rafalski."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "Love Mateychuk. I'm so impressed that they sent him to (the AHL) even though he was their best defenseman in the preseason. He deserved to stay, but (under GM Don Waddell) they can see the big picture now. He's got great instincts on both ends of the ice."

Minus: "He could do it all in junior, and he usually did. He's learning to rely on teammates now in Cleveland. He's not the biggest guy, so he has to work on his leverage. He needs to keep working on that mindset that he needs to jump up every play."

Comparable: "He's going to be better than John-Michael Liles, but his skating — the agility, the edges — reminds me of him."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "Instant breakout. He can use his feet or a pass. His edges (skating) are some of the best edges I've ever seen. Not as good as Quinn Hughes, but it's right there. When he wants to turn, it's over. He's gone. It's that low center of gravity. He's powerful."

Minus: "It's what everybody's going to say: It's tough for a guy who's under 6 feet and 200 pounds to play top four in the NHL, even today. Guys can do it. He's good enough. But it's a challenge."

Comparable: "Is he Torey Krug? Maybe a slightly taller version of Krug. I can't think of any smaller defensemen who were pretty thick."

Cole Sillinger

Position: Center

Age: 21

Career: 250 games, 37-56-93

This season: 30 games, 5-14-19

Scout No. 1

Plus: "This kid has it to me, but only as a middle-six guy. He's probably a future third-line center on a good team. You can tell he comes from a hockey family, and there are good voices in his ear. When he struggled and went to (the AHL in 2022-23), you never heard from his agent. You never saw him in trade rumors. He didn't pout. He killed penalties and worked away at it."

Minus: "We maybe had too high a ceiling on his offensive upside. He was physically dominant as a young player, but he's not exceptional like that in the NHL. Offensively, it's a struggle. If all goes well, he'll be a half-point-a-game guy."

Comparable: "I'll say Jean-Gabriel Pageau."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "I'm on the fence about which way he's going to go. There are times you see flashes where he looks top-six, and then he fights the puck for a couple of weeks and you're back to thinking he's bottom-six."

Minus: "I do love how he competes. He's at the front of the line every night. But I think third line is the peak. Could he end up a fourth-line center? He could. His heart is ahead of his hands."

Comparable: "Stu Barnes."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "Silly has just always reminded me of his dad. This year he's shown more skill. Those guys who play on your third and fourth line should kill penalties, and he's really gotten good at that. I was resigned to him being a fourth-line guy a couple of years ago. I can see third line. A real good third-line guy."

Minus: "You want him to be more polished, more skilled offensively. You'll live with those limitations because of how hard he goes and how much he cares."

Comparable: "Mike Sillinger."

Dmitri Voronkov

Position: LW/RW

Age: 24

Career: 97 games, 26-21-47

This season: 22 games, 8-5-13

Scout No. 1

Plus: "A big man who can play old-school. You're picking him first in summer hockey because he has hands and he can score. He doesn't always look the part. He looks like a defenseman, honestly. But when he gets the puck, he knows what to do with it."

Minus: "He has zero detail in his game. Zero. But he has so many things that you can't teach. If somebody can get through to him ... if he slims down, he could be a legitimate second-line power forward."

Comparable: "Dave Andreychuk ... minus 400 goals. (laughs) But, really, a big guy with really good hands. Unmovable."

Scout No. 2

Plus: "This guy is such a horse. He's going to get points by going to dirty areas. He's a middle-six guy for me, and definitely on the wing."

Minus: "He's usually feistier than he's been this season. I don't know what that's about. That's an element of his game that he needs to get back. It's part of his makeup."

Comparable: "I've got two. Nik Antropov and Brian Boyle."

Scout No. 3

Plus: "He's got incredible hands for a guy that's almost 250 (pounds). I like the player. I think he's a third-line winger who could score 15 to 20 goals. He's got very good hockey sense."

Minus: "Just be a little quicker. He's probably going to be a third-line guy his whole career — he probably thinks he's better than that, but ... he's got to get better defensively. And he will. He already has."

Comparable: "He's an odd duck as a comparison. Who's that big with that skill set? Give me Brian Boyle."

The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Latest on Provorov, Canucks trade needs, Hurricanes goalies and why Avs jumped on Blackwood

By Pierre LeBrun – December 17, 2024

Vladimir Provorov committed to Ohio State's men's hockey team Monday. Yes, that's the younger brother of Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov.

Things that make you go, 'hmm'?

Should we be reconsidering having Provorov near the top of Chris Johnston's trade board on The Athletic?

Well, that remains to be seen.

"Ivan is happy to be in Columbus, happy to play there," Provorov's agent, Mark Gandler, told The Athletic on Tuesday, "He thinks that the team is going to go places. It's clear that the team is better than it was last year. Personally, I have all the confidence in the world in (general manager) Don Waddell's ability. He's an experienced manager who knows what he's doing. I think the team is going to improve every year.

"So we'll just wait and see where it goes."

So to be clear, would the top-four defenseman and pending unrestricted free agent be open to an extension in Columbus?

"Absolutely," Gandler said. "Absolutely."

"From the day I got (to Columbus), I've enjoyed my time here," Provorov told The Athletic's Aaron Portzline recently. "I like the city. I love the organization and the boys in the room. For me, I feel great here. But, obviously, a lot of times it's out of your hands. So, I'm just focused on playing and doing the best I can and trying to help the team win."

But the decision by his younger brother, 16, to commit to Ohio State doesn't necessarily impact what happens between Ivan, 27, and the Jackets. They're separate business decisions, Gandler said.

“As far as his younger brother, the only thing that his decision has to do with Ivan is that he knows Columbus, the family knows Columbus, and they are comfortable for him to develop in Columbus (at Ohio State),” Gandler said.

Vladimir currently plays for the AAA New Jersey Rockets and obviously, at only 16, won't be joining Ohio State for two or three years.

“Whether or not Ivan is still there, if Ivan stays it's going to be a bonus, but it's not really a determining factor,” Gandler said. “The determining factor is the fact that Ohio State is a very good program with an excellent coaching staff. It's going places. In a very friendly, comfortable environment.”

The brothers are very close, Gandler said, despite the age difference. And it would be amazing if they were both in Columbus plying their craft at the same time, of course. But I wouldn't read into that to imagine any big discounts are coming from Provorov ahead of July 1.

Gandler and Waddell haven't discussed a possible extension yet. That discussion, which could go either way, likely waits for the New Year.

While I think the Jackets are open to an extension discussion, just as Provorov is, what remains to be seen is what both sides think is a fair number. Provorov is in the last year of a six-year contract with an average annual value of \$6.75 million. He plays 23 minutes a night. He turns 28 next month. What's he worth on July 1?

With the growing salary cap, agents and front offices are having very interesting conversations these days. Salaries are about to spike big time around the league over the next few years.

Whatever number (and term) the Jackets are comfortable with will almost surely be different than what the July 1 market could provide Provorov. So odds are, if the Jackets aren't in a playoff spot closer to March 7 (although they're still in the fight right now), he's probably still getting traded. Could he still come back to the Jackets on July 1 in that scenario? Who knows.

But I would say the news this week of his younger brother committing to Ohio State at least gives everyone involved something to think about.

Impressive Caps

The thing about this sport is that superstars go down and teams so often find a way.

The Toronto Maple Leafs forged along without Auston Matthews last month (going 7-2-0), and the Edmonton Oilers got it done short-term (2-1) without Connor McDavid earlier this season. So it's not like anyone thought the Washington Capitals would be done after they lost Alex Ovechkin last month.

He did have 15 goals in 18 games before going down. I don't care if he's 39. They're still going to miss that. But Washington going 8-3-1 in the 12 games since his injury has certainly been an exclamation point to one of the best surprise stories this season.

People keep waiting for the Caps to come down to earth. They haven't.

They had one of the NHL's most aggressive offseasons, which continued their retool from the past few years — as I detailed in a piece last month — and their stellar performance during No. 8's absence only underlines where this team is now.

“I think it starts with John (Carlson) and Tom (Wilson) and our leadership group,” Caps GM Chris Patrick told The Athletic via text message Monday. “Both with their play on the ice and off the ice, they have helped reinforce what the team has been doing, which is continue to play with structure and consistency every night.”

Hat's off, too, to head coach Spencer Carbery, and I wonder if we'll start hearing his name a bit more often in the Jack Adams Award conversation if this season continues to go this way for Washington.

As for Ovechkin's all-time goals record chase, that will resume in short order. He will potentially return either for one game just before the holiday break or should be ready to go for games coming out of the break.

Spencer Carbery looks like an early Jack Adams candidate. (Bruce Bennett / Getty Images)

Canucks' needs

The Vancouver Canucks have been inconsistent so far this season, and Jim Rutherford's appearance on HNIC's After Hours over the weekend certainly gave one the impression they won't sit on their hands, either.

League sources confirm that the Canucks are on the lookout for a top-four defenseman as well as a winger. And in keeping with Rutherford tradition, I would imagine GM Patrik Allvin would want to make a trade sooner than later and not wait until the March 7 deadline. He acquired Elias Lindholm on Jan. 31 last season, very much keeping with the Rutherford-esque style to get ahead of the deadline.

Filip Hronek's injury has been difficult to overcome, so that has fueled the need to trade for a top-four D. Easier said than done, but I don't think Vancouver will wait too long if it can find a fit.

Canes goalies

The Carolina Hurricanes were interested in Mackenzie Blackwood before he got dealt to the Colorado Avalanche last week. But they weren't going to pay the kind of price the Avalanche did because while Colorado had a clear, urgent need to replace its No. 1 in net, Carolina believes strongly in its No. 1 goalie, Pyotr Kochetkov.

But what the Canes have been calling teams about for several weeks now is insurance in goal. And I believe they would have traded for a goalie by now had a willing trade partner materialized.

With Blackwood off the market, other goalies on the Canes' radar include Utah's Karel Vejmelka, the Ottawa Senators' Anton Forsberg and the Calgary Flames' Dan Vladar — all pending UFAs. But those teams aren't in selling mode yet and some may not be at all depending on how their respective seasons go. They all are still in playoff races at this point. If any of them are willing to move those goalies, though, I believe Carolina would be willing to make a deal at any time.

Another name on Carolina's radar is John Gibson — at the right price and certainly with the Ducks retaining salary. But it sounds like Anaheim has a higher price on Gibson than Carolina would be willing to pay right now. So I don't see that happening unless that changes.

Mackenzie Blackwood has a .937 save percentage so far for the Avalanche and could earn an extension. (Matthew Stockman / Getty Images)

Avs-Blackwood

It is pretty rare for a Stanley Cup contender to swap out both of its goaltenders before Christmas, and it's certainly not what the Avalanche had in mind a month ago, but they felt the urgency to address their woeful goaltending.

Part of the decision to act this early in the season, especially when it comes to new No. 1 Blackwood, was the Avs' belief that they had to jump the queue and get ahead of the other teams circling around San Jose on the goalie, notably Carolina.

But there's another important reason for the early move: The Avs may have interest in making it a long-term relationship with Blackwood — and if they're going to extend the pending UFA before July 1, they wanted as many games as possible to judge his performance before making that commitment. So waiting until March 7 didn't make sense from that vantage point.