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## Columbus Dispatch / Rewind: Werenski delivers for Columbus Blue Jackets in 7-6 OT win over Tampa Bay Lightning

By Brian Hedger – November 22, 2024

The Blue Jackets outlasted the Tampa Bay Lightning, 7-6, in a goal bonanza that kept a crowd of 16,260 entertained Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Kent Johnson scored two goals in his return from a shoulder injury, Sean Monahan had four points with a goal and three assists, and Zach Werenski ended it 1:26 into overtime with his second goal and career-high fifth point of a crazy hockey game.

Cam Atkinson scored his first goal of the season for the Lightning in the first period, but his former team got the last laugh in OT. Here's a blog timeline on how it played out:

### **FINAL: Columbus Blue Jackets 7, Tampa Bay Lightning 6**

Saying this game was nuts would be an understatement. After 13 combined goals, the Blue Jackets come out the winner in a game that feels like a major turning point in their development curve as a young, exciting team.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8) celebrates scoring the game winning goal beside Tampa Bay Lightning right wing Nikita Kucherov (86) during overtime of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 7-6.

### **GOAL, OT 1:26: Columbus Blue Jackets 7, Tampa Bay Lightning 6**

Zach attack. Zach Werenski snipes one under the crossbar and this circus show is over. Blue Jackets win. What a game.

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) take the net for overtime of the NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 7-6.

### **END OF REGULATION: Columbus Blue Jackets 6, Tampa Bay Lightning 6**

This game is drunk and headed to overtime with 12 combined goals. This is all we needed is some 3-on-3 hockey after three periods on the pond. Here we go.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Damon Severson (78) fights for a puck with Tampa Bay Lightning center Conor Geekie (14) during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

### **GOAL, 3rd period 11:23: Columbus Blue Jackets 6, Tampa Bay Lightning 6**

Shocking development here, but the Lightning have again erased the Blue Jackets' lead in less than a minute with an equalizer. This one's deflected in the slot by Conor Geekie and it may have clipped off Damon Severson, too, before getting past Elvis Merzlikins.

Tied again in Columbus.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) celebrates scoring a goal past Tampa Bay Lightning goaltender Jonas Johansson (31) during the third period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 7-6 in overtime.

### **GOAL, 3rd period 10:39: Columbus Blue Jackets 6, Tampa Bay Lightning 5**

Tough penalty to stomach sends Sean Kuraly to the penalty box, after he stumbled and took down Victor Hedman in the neutral zone. Probably should've let that one go, but it was called and the Lightning went to the power play. The Jackets, however, took their second lead of the game on Kent Johnson's second goal of the game and fourth of the season.

This is the sixth time the Blue Jackets have scored six goals in a game this season. How many games? Nineteen. Process that one.

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Mathieu Olivier (24) skates past Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman J.J. Moser (90) during the third period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024. The Blue Jackets won 7-6 in overtime.

### **3rd period, 6:28: Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Tampa Bay Lightning 5**

At the first TV timeout, the score's still tied somehow. Since combining to score six goals in the first 6:18 of the second period, neither team has gotten another puck past either goalie. Tense times.

### **2ND PERIOD START: Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Tampa Bay Lightning 5**

Tampa Bay Lightning goaltender Jonas Johansson (31) saves a shot from Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Mathieu Olivier (24) beside defenseman Jake Christiansen (2) during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

The puck's on the ice for another period of pond hockey for the Blue Jackets and Lightning.

### **END OF 2ND PERIOD: Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Tampa Bay Lightning 5**

Well, that was certainly an interesting 20 minutes. Six combined goals, four for the Blue Jackets, in the first 6:18 and then a 5-5 tie in the final 11:42 to bring us to the end. Shots are 29-25 for Columbus after the Blue Jackets outshot the Lightning 21-13 in the second.

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) stops a shot during the second period of the NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

The Jackets also owned the final six-plus minutes of the period and will start the third with huge 5-on-5 advantages in Corsi percentage (61.3%), scoring chances (36-11, 74.4%), high-danger chances (13-9, 59.1%) and expected goals percentage (63.9%).

It's somewhat shocking to see numbers like that in a tied game, but that's where we're at going to the third in Columbus.

### **GOAL, 2nd period 6:18: Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Tampa Bay Lightning 5**

Do either one of these teams want to play defense this period? Seriously. Wow. Anthony Cirelli's sixth goal of the season cuts the Blue Jackets' lead to only 52 seconds. This is madness. Through the game's first 21:18, there were a combined 71 attempts, 36 shots and 10 goals. Just your normal night at Nationwide Arena.

### **GOAL, 2nd period 5:26: Columbus Blue Jackets 5, Tampa Bay Lightning 4**

Hey, look at that, can you believe this? A goal. Never would've guessed this. The Blue Jackets take their first lead of the night on Yegor Chinakhov's sixth goal of the season and second in as many games. He's a streaky one.

### **GOAL, 2nd period 3:41: Columbus Blue Jackets 4, Tampa Bay Lightning 4**

You get a goal! You get a goal! You, sir, you get a goal too! Goals galore!

Zach Werenski sends one along the ice to the Tampa Bay net, it deflects off something and eludes Johansson to tie the game on his fifth goal of the season.

Teammates celebrate a goal by Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8) during the second period of the NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

### **GOAL, 2nd period 2:11: Tampa Bay Lightning 4, Columbus Blue Jackets 3**

The tie lasted 17 seconds. This second period is a bit of a mess both ways, but, hey, cannon blasts and disappointments. Fantilli makes a poor read in the neutral zone, couldn't stop a play at the red line, the Lightning got an odd-man rush out of it and then a go-ahead goal from somebody named Mitchell Chaffee, who had Conor Geekie's shot hit him in the neck and drop near his stick for a mid-air tap into the net.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) celebrates scoring a goal during the second period of the NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

### **GOAL, 2nd period 1:54: Columbus Blue Jackets 3, Tampa Bay Lightning 3**

Look who ties it up on a power play. Why, it's that Kent Johnson kid, playing his first game back from a lengthy absence with a shoulder injury. One-timer under the glove, inside Johansson's body and into the net for Johnson's third goal of the season to knot it up with J.J. Moser in the penalty box for hooking.

Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Dmitri Voronkov (10) celebrates scoring a goal during the second period of the NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

### **GOAL, 2nd period 0:28: Tampa Bay Lightning 3, Columbus Blue Jackets 2**

First things first. Kucherov returned for the start of the second period. That's good news for Tampa Bay. Bad news for the Lightning is that Voronkov got a blue-line breakaway on the period's first shift to pull the Jackets within a goal. Camped just outside the Lightning blue line, the Jackets' power forward took a stretch pass from Monahan and ripped a shot past Johansson's glove side for his fourth goal of the season.

### **END OF 1ST PERIOD: Tampa Bay Lightning 3, Columbus Blue Jackets 1**

Tampa Bay Lightning right wing Cam Atkinson (13) celebrates scoring a goal during the first period of the NHL hockey game against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

Interesting development during the waning moments of a period that Tampa Bay dominated. Nikita Kucherov took a slash on the hand or wrist from Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen during the final shift of the period and immediately headed to the dressing room.

The slash looked relatively benign at live speed, which is probably why it wasn't caught or called a penalty. Kucherov did drop his stick immediately and head back to the bench hunched over in pain, holding his right arm. We'll see if he returns for the start of the second. Kucherov already has two assists in this one, setting up the Lightning's first two goals with primary helpers.

After a terrible start, falling behind 3-0, the Blue Jackets finished the first period with impressive secondary numbers. According to Natural Stat Trick, they racked up large 5-on-5 edges in Corsi percentage (59.6%) and scoring chance percentage (13-6, 68.4%) and stayed even at 5-5 in high-danger chances.

They were outshot 11-8, but two of those shots for the Lightning were on the power play — including Point scoring the game's first goal.

#### **GOAL, 1st period 13:35: Tampa Bay Lightning 3, Columbus Blue Jackets 1**

Is that the sight of the Blue Jackets hearing the alarm clock buzz? After falling behind 3-0 here in the first, they finally get one back on Monahan's team-high seventh goal of the season. Assists to Damon Severson and Kirill Marchenko.

The assist increases his team points lead to 17 on six goals and 11 assists. Monahan has 7-9-16.

#### **GOAL, 1st period 11:52: Tampa Bay Lightning 3, Columbus Blue Jackets 0**

Tampa Bay Lightning right wing Cam Atkinson (13) celebrates scoring a goal in front of Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

And there's Atkinson, scoring against his former team for the second time in his career and first with the Lightning. It's also his first goal for the Lightning period, first goal of the season. A few Blue Jackets fans gave him a polite cheer when his name was announced.

Meanwhile, his former team is getting hammered to start this game.

#### **GOAL, 1st period 3:58: Tampa Bay Lightning 2, Columbus Blue Jackets 0**

The rink is lit up prior to the NHL hockey game between the Columbus Blue Jackets and the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024.

Remember all those early "10 bell" saves Merzlikins made Monday in Boston to save the Blue Jackets' collective bacon? Yeah, well, this Lightning team isn't wasting opportunities and Merzlikins had no chance to stop this one — a one-time goal for Brandon Hagel to cap a beautiful shot pass by Nikita Kucherov off Anthony Cirelli's rebound between the circles.

Ugly start for the home side.

#### **GOAL, 1st period 1:51: Tampa Bay Lightning 1, Columbus Blue Jackets 0**

Well, that didn't take long. As mentioned earlier in this blog, Brayden Point really enjoys making the Blue Jackets sting by scoring goals and racking up points against them. On this occasion, Point nets his 15th career goal and 29th point in 27 career game against Columbus, capping a power play to give the Lightning the game's first lead less than two minutes into it.

Ivan Provorov, who's usually out there killing penalties, watched that one from the confines of the penalty box after hooking Jake Guentzel. Blue Jackets trail early.

#### **GAME START: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, Tampa Bay Lightning 0**

Another touching tribute to the ongoing fight against cancer set the stage for this year's Hockey Fights Cancer Night, and now the puck's down for hockey at Nationwide Arena.

#### **Columbus Blue Jackets vs Tampa Bay Lightning lineups**

Nov 1, 2023; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman Nick Perbix (48) bats the puck away from Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Dmitri Voronkov (10) during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena.

#### **BLUE JACKETS**

##### **Forwards**

(10) Dmitri Voronkov — (23) Sean Monahan — (86) Kirill Marchenko

(21) James van Riemsdyk — (19) Adam Fantilli — (91) Kent Johnson

(59) Yegor Chinakhov — (4) Cole Sillinger — (24) Mathieu Olivier

(27) Zach Aston-Reese — (7) Sean Kuraly — (17) Justin Danforth

Defensemen

(8) Zach Werenski — (15) Dante Fabbro

(2) Jake Christiansen — (9) Ivan Provorov

(3) Jack Johnson — (78) Damon Severson

### **Goalies**

(90) Elvis Merzlikins

(40) Daniil Tarasov

**Scratched:** RW, Kevin Labanc, D Jordan Harris

**Injured:** F Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery), D Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery) and F Kent Johnson (shoulder)

**Feb. 10, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA;**

Tampa Bay Lightning center Anthony Cirelli (71) celebrates after scoring a goal during the second period of a hockey game against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Saturday.

### **LIGHTNING**

#### **Forwards**

(38) Brandon Hagel — (71) Anthony Cirelli — (86) Nikita Kucherov

(59) Jake Guentzel — (21) Brayden Point — (93) Gage Goncalves

(13) Cam Atkinson — (14) Conor Geekie — (41) Mitchell Chaffee

(28) Zemgus Girgensons — (11) Luke Glendening — (23) Michael Eyssimont

#### **Defensemen**

(77) Victor Hedman — (90) J.J. Moser

(27) Ryan McDonagh — (81) Erik Cernak

(78) Emil Lilleberg — (48) Nick Perbix

#### **Goalies**

(31) Jonas Johansson

(88) Andrei Vasilevskiy

**Scratched:** D Darren Raddysch

**Injured:** LW Nick Paul (undisclosed)

**Columbus Blue Jackets vs Tampa Bay Lightning storylines**

### **COLUMBUS**

The Blue Jackets won two of their past three games over the Pittsburgh Penguins and Boston Bruins by a combined score of 11-3 while losing 5-1 on Saturday in Montreal between those triumphs. Merzlikins will get back in net after picking up a win Monday in Boston with an impressive 28-save performance, while forward Kevin Labanc comes out of the lineup for Johnson to return.

The Jackets also loaned defenseman David Jiricek and forward Mikael Pyyhtia to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters on Wednesday to create a roster spot for Johnson to come off injured reserve today, which you can read about here, and prospect Cayden Lindstrom underwent a microdiscectomy procedure Tuesday to relieve a herniated lumbar disc in his lower back. Read about that situation by clicking here.

## TAMPA BAY

The Lightning have won three straight games with their victories against the struggling Pittsburgh Penguins, high octane New Jersey Devils and dominant Winnipeg Jets. Tampa Bay held an optional skate, so it's unclear which goalie will get the start in net. Forward Nick Paul has an undisclosed injury, won't play and will be re-evaluated when the Lightning return to Tampa.

Along with Nikita Kucherov and Victor Hedman, keep Brayden Point's name in your frontal lobe. He's a proven pest when it comes to scoring goals against the Blue Jackets and scored two huge goals Tuesday in Pittsburgh — including the Lightning's overtime winner. Point, who missed practice Wednesday for an unknown reason, has 14 goals, 14 assists and 28 points in 26 career games against the Blue Jackets in the regular season.

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) defends Tampa Bay Lightning right wing Mathieu Joseph (7) during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Thursday, April 8, 2021.

### Columbus Blue Jackets vs Tampa Bay Lightning history

**All-time record:** The Blue Jackets are 15-27-6 with one tie in 49 games against the Lightning, including 10-12-2 with one tie at Nationwide Arena. Tampa Bay took last season's three-game series by winning the final two games.

**Last meeting:** The Blue Jackets lost, 5-2, on April 9, 2024, at Tampa Bay's Amalie Arena. Steven Stamkos, who's now with the Nashville Predators, led the Lightning and all scorers with a hat trick and four points in the win.

**2024-25 matchups:** Nov. 21 in Columbus (7 p.m.); Dec. 17 in Tampa (7 p.m.) and March 4 in Tampa (7 p.m.)

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8) takes the puck up the ice while defended by Tampa Bay Lightning right wing Nikita Kucherov (86) during the second period of a hockey game at Nationwide Arena on Saturday.

Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' schedule for November, along with start times, television, and radio information of upcoming games:

**Saturday, Nov. 23:** Blue Jackets vs Hurricanes | 7 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

**Wednesday, Nov. 27:** Blue Jackets vs Canadiens | 7:30 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

**Friday, Nov. 29:** Blue Jackets vs Calgary Flames | 3 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 93.3 The Bus

**November Record:** 2-6-1, 8th place, Metropolitan Division

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Kuraly (7) defends the goal during the second period of a hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning at Nationwide Arena on Saturday.

**Columbus Blue Jackets vs Tampa Bay Lightning records**

**Records:** Blue Jackets 7-9-2, 16 points, 8th place in the Metropolitan Division; Lightning 10-6-1, 21 points, 3rd place in the Atlantic Division

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov (9) and Tampa Bay Lightning center Michael Eyssimont (23) trade blows during the third period of a hockey game at Nationwide Arena on Saturday.



## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson eager to return against Tampa Bay Lightning

By Brian Hedger – November 22, 2024

Kent Johnson left the ice in the second period of the Blue Jackets' fourth game, which made it feel like something supernatural was necessary to "cleanse" Nationwide Arena.

A séance, perhaps? Something involving candles, a basin filled with gin and/or a reading from Tobin's Spirit Guide: Official Ghostbusters Edition?

Oct 17, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) skates with the puck against the Buffalo Sabres in the first period at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

It wasn't just the fact Johnson was injured. It was how soon it happened plus the injury itself and his scorching hot start to what felt like a huge breakout season beginning. Chasing the puck after linemate James van Riemsdyk was hauled down, Johnson was accidentally undercut by his fallen teammate and tumbled hard — caboose over tea kettle.

There was initial concern that he might've re-torn his labrum in the same shoulder that was surgically repaired last spring. Luckily, that wasn't the case. It was another fluke injury, however, that was the second of its kind in consecutive games for the Jackets — following defenseman Erik Gudbranson's shoulder injury that did require surgery following a "friendly fire" collision with Sean Monahan in the season's third game.

Captain Boone Jenner also went down during a preseason practice with a shoulder injury that required surgery, and that one happened in practice a day after Dmitri Voronkov injured his left shoulder on his first shift of an exhibition game against the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Blue Jackets were clearly cursed by the "Ghosts of Nationwide" that some say haunt their home arena, which was built next to the grounds of an infamous former state prison.

Sep 24, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) and defenseman Erik Gudbranson (44) stand in front of goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) during the first period of the NHL preseason hockey game at Nationwide Arena.

They've since received two strokes of good luck, however, so put the séance on hold ... for now.

Neither Voronkov nor Johnson required surgery, instead rehabbing their injuries to the points where both will play Thursday against the Tampa Bay Lightning. For Voronkov, it will be his 10th game since returning. Johnson will skate in his first game since tumbling over van Riemsdyk, who will again play on his line.

Johnson has missed 14 games.

"Right when it happened, I was kind of looking at the dates of games," he said. "I had some games on my list, 'This one, maybe?' and it's been quicker than that, so it's been a good recovery. A lot of credit (goes) to the trainers and strength staff here, and just everyone for helping me out and getting me right."

Oct 15, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) skates on the ice in the third period during the home opener at Nationwide Arena on Tuesday.

Johnson could tell quickly it wasn't the same injury, but his anger still boiled over as tossed one of his gloves leaving the bench. Now that he's back, Johnson hopes to pick up where he left off. The Blue

Jackets are averaging 3.22 goals per game to date, and now they're getting back a playmaking winger who co-led the team in scoring through four games with Kirill Marchenko.

Asked Wednesday if there's any concern about "rust," Johnson shook his head.

"I don't believe so," he said. "I felt good (in practice)."

Oct 3, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) skates with the puck against the Pittsburgh Penguins in the third period at Nationwide Arena.

He also received more contact in 5-on-5 work and spent time working with both special teams, including his role as the Jackets' right wing on the top power-play group. Depending on how long it takes Johnson to regain his timing and re-adjust to the NHL's frenetic pace, his return could provide a large boost for an offense that's already sneaky good.

"I was not only impressed with his skill set, but his attention to detail," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "In the short time that I've seen him, he's a well-rounded player that plays in all three zones extremely well. He's a 'rink rat,' for lack of a better or good term. He just loves the game, so yeah, he's going to provide us with a good boost with his energy level, as well."

Oct 3, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) skates with the puck in the third period at Nationwide Arena.

That's Johnson's goal too.

"Obviously, as a player, you always want to get back as soon as you can," he said. "But I think we've been smart. I feel very ready now and confident in (my) strength. I'm confident, but I don't want to have too (many) expectations, other than just what I can control ... my work ethic and my attitude. I expect that to be really high, but other than that, we'll just see."

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets hope AHL assignment boosts Jiricek, Pyhytia into NHL regulars

**By Brian Hedger – November 22, 2024**

David Jiricek is rolling up on his 21st birthday, which arrives next week.

The former sixth overall pick of the 2022 NHL draft is also headed back up I-71 to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters along with rookie forward Mikael Pyhytia. Each fell out of the Blue Jackets' playing mix, so it's time for AHL roles while they work on opposite areas of the game.

Jiricek must shore up his defensive play and make better reads without the puck. Pyhytia needs an offensive boost.

"This is a tough league," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It's the best league in the world. ... It's incredible, and the athletes today — with the speed, the strength, the size — it's all elite. It's a difficult league to play, so you need to work at it in order to get good at it, in order to help your team have success."

It might seem like Jiricek is spinning his tires on a treacherous path that could lead to being labeled a first-round "bust" because he hasn't cemented a full-time NHL role. That's not accurate.

Looking at other defensemen from the 2022 draft's top-10 picks shows that only one, Anaheim's Pavel Mintyukov (10th overall), is playing regular NHL minutes. He skates on the left side of the Ducks' top pairing and quarterbacks the second power-play in his second full season. Mintyukov has seven goals, 26 assists and 33 points in 80 career games, along with a -24 plus/minus rating for a rebuilding team willing to pay a steep defensive price.

Time will tell whether that's wise, but it's not a common development strategy. In fact, the other three defensemen from 2022's top 10 are all in the AHL again after getting a taste of the NHL in spurts the past three seasons — including the New Jersey Devils' Simon Nemec (second overall), Jiricek (sixth overall) and Chicago's Kevin Korchiński (seventh overall).

The Blue Jackets also have the 12th pick from that draft, defenseman Denton Mateychuk, thriving in Cleveland during his AHL rookie season. He was just named the AHL's Player of the Week and has yet to make his NHL debut. Additionally, only three defensemen from 2022's entire first round are presently with their NHL team: Mintyukov (Ducks), Pittsburgh's Owen Pickering (No. 21) and Utah's Maveric Lamoureux (No. 29).

As Evason said, the NHL's a "tough league" and defensemen play arguably the most difficult position.

Most development experts feel they aren't fully prepared to make a positive overall impact until somewhere between 200 and 300 NHL games, which none of 2022's draft class are even close to reaching. That includes Jiricek, who has a career scoring line for the Blue Jackets of 1-10-11 in 53 games over three seasons. He's done a lot in the AHL, including All-Star honors following his rookie season in Cleveland, but could still sharpen his defensive skills in that league.

"I know he hasn't played the minutes that he wants to play, but his confidence ... we (could) tell just watching him the other night, he's worried about making that mistake," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said. "It's a tough position to start with, but especially for a young player. So, we just made a decision we thought was best."

Take Jiricek's biggest area of improvement, flip it around and you have the reason that Pyyhtia, 22, is now in Cleveland.

Selected in 2020 (fourth round), Pyyhtia added just one point on one goal in 17 games. "Tuna" — his nickname due to the difficult pronunciation of his Finnish last name — sat as a healthy scratch Monday in the Blue Jackets' 5-1 victory over the Boston Bruins. While his shooting percentage was a solid 9.1%, he only put 11 shots on goal for an average of 0.65 per game.

Since making his NHL debut with the Blue Jackets in 2022-23, Pyyhtia (pronounced PEW-tia) has added just 1-3-4 in 36 games. He's defensively sound despite a career -13 plus/minus, which is great, but is also a one-way player without a significant scoring boost.

"He now has to gather some confidence offensively," Evason said. "We're extremely happy with 'Tuna' in the way that he's conducted himself and he's played, so he needs to go play and hopefully score some goals and feel good about his game offensively ... because his defensive side is fantastic."

Waddell and Evason met with Jiricek and Pyyhtia individually before they were loaned to the Monsters. They explained what each needed to do in Cleveland, and made it clear that going back isn't something to be embarrassed about.

It should help both of them in the long-term, but there's always disappointment on the player's end. Jiricek and his agent, Allan Walsh, were quite vocal last season about the Blue Jackets toggling him between Cleveland and Columbus during previous GM Jarmo Kekalainen's final season at the helm, so it's fair to wonder about their reaction this time. As of Thursday morning, Walsh hadn't posted anything on his Twitter/X account. Evason said Jiricek didn't give an indication that he's not onboard with the plan, and Waddell isn't concerned about him not reporting to the Monsters.

Waddell has also received calls from opposing GMs about trades involving Jiricek, but won't just spin off a highly valued young defenseman for pennies on the dollar. Those typically take longer to develop than forwards, so Waddell and the Blue Jackets' front office will stay patient.

"I just told everybody (the return's) got to be equivalent," Waddell said. "We're not really loaded at any one position, so we're open-minded about that, but we're not going to trade any young player for a 27, 28 year old player. That doesn't make any sense with where we are at this point. So, we'll listen, and if something makes sense, we'll look at it and make a move if it makes our team better."

Meanwhile, it's up to Jiricek and Pyyhtia to earn their way back.

"Going to the minors, you're playing professional hockey and you're developing, and it's a process," Evason said. "Do we want a young player sitting out? No, and do we want a young player playing 7-8 minutes? No. We want a player to play, so that he can develop to help us win hockey games ... for him and for the organization."

## The Athletic / Zach Werenski sets career high, scores OT winner in Blue Jackets' wild win over Lightning

**By Aaron Portzline – November 22, 2024**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Zach Werenski is a two-time NHL All-Star and one of the highest-scoring defensemen in the league since he debuted with the Columbus Blue Jackets in 2016-17. It's not as if the 27-year-old isn't a highly regarded player.

But he might be elevating into a different stratosphere this season.

Werenski had the first 5-point game of his career, scoring two goals including the overtime game winner in the Blue Jackets' wild 7-6 overtime victory over the Tampa Bay Lightning on Thursday in Nationwide Arena.

The Blue Jackets came back from a 3-0 deficit for just the sixth time in franchise history, according to the NHL, but it took a four-goal second period, a short-handed goal to take a 6-5 lead midway through the third and Werenski's winner at 1:26 of OT.

Kent Johnson, who had been out a month with a shoulder injury, celebrated his return to the lineup by scoring two goals, and Dmitri Voronkov, Sean Monahan and Yegor Chinakhov also scored. Monahan, who matched a career high with 4 points, also had three assists.

Asked whether these back-and-forth, pond-hockey-style games are as fun to play as they are to watch, Werenski smiled.

"Only if you win," he said. "It's different, right? It's one of those things that doesn't happen every day, so I don't mind it. It is kind of frustrating when you score and they score and it's back and forth like that.

"But tonight was fine because we got the win, and that's all that matters."

Werenski came over the boards for his second shift of overtime and was welcomed as he entered the offensive zone with a perfect pass from Cole Sillinger. Werenski, with Justin Danforth in the left circle, waited out Tampa Bay defenseman Victor Hedman as he glided between the tops of the circles.

"Silly made a great play to find me there in the slot," Werenski said. "I had to read Hedman there. Once he kind of reached his stick to take (away the) pass, I had the shot.

"Great play by Silly. I really didn't do much. I just got on the ice and was in the slot."

On the night Werenski jumped over David Vyborny for fifth on the franchise's points list — he's at 321, 13 short of tying Nick Foligno for fourth — Werenski scored his sixth career OT goal, tying him for second on the franchise list with Rick Nash and Cam Atkinson. (Seth Jones had eight.)

None of this will be a surprise to Columbus fans. But Werenski is putting together the type of season that might generate league-wide acclaim. His scoring outburst Thursday left him tied for second among NHL defensemen with 19 points (6-13-19) in 19 games.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason played more than 800 games in the NHL and has coached almost 250 with Minnesota and Columbus.

"I've seen a lot of hockey players," Evason said. "I don't think I've seen one like him, honestly. He's just ... he's amazing. When he wants the puck, he goes and gets it. When he wants to defend, he defends.

“He’s taken on a way bigger role within our room and on the bench and away from the rink. He’s embraced it. In the past, he’s been maybe more quiet and reserved, but this has pushed him forward and it’s helped his game on the ice as well.”

Werenski had the primary assist on both of Johnson’s goals, setting him up for a power-play goal at 1:55 of the second and springing him for a short-handed goal at 10:39 of the third.

“It’s unbelievable (the way he’s playing),” Johnson said of Werenski. “He’s always been a superstar, but this year he’s elevated even more, and I’m excited for him. Hopefully, he can keep going and really have a season that puts him on the map as a top D-man, because I really believe he is. (He could) be up for the Norris. He could be up for Team USA (at the 4 Nations in February). He deserves all that stuff.”

The Blue Jackets dressing room was strangely non-celebratory after the game. That’s rare after a win, but it was clear nobody was pleased with needing to score seven goals and requiring overtime to win. The six goals against were a point of contention.

“It looks great,” Evason said. “Fans I’m sure love it. Coaches don’t love it that much.

“We got down three (only 11:52 into the game) and we debated calling a timeout. It was so quiet in the building, it was quiet on our bench. It was a little eerie. But there was no panic. The guys weren’t screaming and yelling. We stuck with it and kept going and it worked out.”

The Blue Jackets have scored six or more goals in six games this season, roughly one-third of their schedule. Armed with that type of scoring confidence, falling behind 3-0 didn’t seem so overwhelming, though it’s not advised.

“I do believe ... we do believe that we have a skill set in our group to score,” Evason said. “We just have to keep harping on not giving up six (goals). We think we’re going to score goals consistently, but we have to hammer down keeping it out of our net.”

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets fuel trade speculation by sending prospect David Jiricek to minors

**By Aaron Portzline – November 22, 2024**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets made a move on Wednesday that was beginning to feel inevitable, maybe even overdue.

Defenseman David Jiricek, the Jackets' No. 6 overall draft pick in 2022, was sent to AHL Cleveland to play heavy minutes, rebuild his confidence and work on his defensive game after dressing in only six of the Blue Jackets' first 18 games this season.

In a grand sense, it's a bit of a surprise. Jiricek, 20, thrived late last season in the AHL regular season and postseason, drawing rave reviews and making an excellent first impression on new Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell.

When training camp dawned this fall, Jiricek was playing on the Blue Jackets' second defensive pair with veteran Ivan Provorov. Not only could he not hold that position, he couldn't secure a spot in the lineup most nights, earning 12 healthy scratches.

"For whatever reason, it hasn't gone as smoothly with his transition to the NHL this year," Waddell said. "He's played in some games. I know he hasn't played the minutes he's wanted to play (an average of 11:12 per game) but his confidence ... just watching him the other night (vs. Boston), and he's worried about making that mistake.

"He's 20 years old. He's going to be 21 at the end of the month (Nov. 28). He's very young, and playing in the NHL is tough enough to start with. We made a decision that we thought it was best for him to go play some games in Cleveland, and we'll see how it goes."

Jiricek was on his way to Cleveland on Wednesday while the Blue Jackets practiced and thus was not available for comment. His agent, Allan Walsh, also declined to be interviewed.

The Blue Jackets also sent forward Mikael Pyyhtiä to AHL Cleveland, a sure sign that winger Kent Johnson — out since Oct. 17 with a shoulder injury — will be activated from injured reserve ahead of Thursday's game against the Tampa Bay Lightning in Nationwide Arena.

Jiricek and Pyyhtiä will likely make their season debut with the Blue Jackets' top minor-league affiliate on Saturday against AHL Milwaukee.

The demotion of Jiricek, still regarded as one of the NHL's top defensive prospects, will no doubt fan the flames of trade speculation. The scouts' seating area in Nationwide Arena has been busy lately; now they'll start heading to Cleveland.

Waddell has acknowledged that other GMs are calling. He also acknowledged he's willing to listen to offers for Jiricek, while most GMs would say publicly that trading one of their organization's top prospects is out of the question.

"As a GM, I have to listen to every trade offer," Waddell said. "It doesn't matter what the player's name is, if we could make our team better, we always have to look at those options.

"I've gotten calls. We'll continue to talk to whoever is interested in whichever player, and if something makes sense for the organization — I've never made a personal decision in my career, it's always what works best for the organization — we'll look at it."

Ultimately, the Blue Jackets' waiver claim this month of defenseman Dante Fabbro — like Jiricek, he's a right-side, right-shot defender — made it considerably more difficult for Jiricek to crack the lineup. He has played only once since Fabbro was claimed. That was on Monday in a win over Boston, and he played only 8:14.

That continues a trend of declining ice time for Jiricek. As an 18-year-old rookie, he had 18:04 per game in his four outings. Last season, in 43 games, he averaged 14:36. This season, he was at 11:12 per game.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said he was demoted and recalled from the minor leagues eight times during his rookie pro season, so he knows what Jiricek is feeling. He also believes this can be a positive experience if handled the right way.

"There are no negatives here," Evason said. "I think a lot of people put a negative tone on people going to the minors to play. You're playing professional hockey. It's a process.

"Do we want a young player sitting out? No. Do we want a young player playing seven or eight minutes per game? No. We want a player to play so that he can develop and help us win hockey games."

Evason said it's been made clear to Jiricek what improvements the coaching staff would like to see in his game. That's been driven home in one-on-one film review with assistant coaches and, after a recent game in San Jose, by Evason himself.

"The thing with Jiri is, when the puck's on his tape, he's fantastic," Evason said. "When the puck's not on his tape, he's got to get more detail in his game.

"He understands it. He's worked his ass off when he hasn't played. He's been committed to trying to do the things we're asking him to do to be a really great pro. He has an offensive upside that's elite. But to play defense in the NHL, you have to defend. He's learning."

When Jiricek and Pyyhtiä were told of their demotions, both Waddell and Evason were in the meeting. Asked how he left it with Jiricek, Evason said:

"Turn this into a positive. Use it the right way. Develop. And get your ass back here to help the Columbus Blue Jackets win."



## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets host Hockey Fights Cancer vs. Lightning](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – November 22, 2024

BLUE JACKETS (7-9-2) vs. LIGHTNING (10-6-1), 7 PM, NATIONWIDE ARENA

You can point to a fair number of areas in which the Blue Jackets have made progress this year, but one of the biggest has been in holding leads.

One season ago, the Blue Jackets were 18-1-7 when leading after two periods, and those eight losses were tied for the third most in the NHL when ahead after 40 minutes. This year, Columbus is 6-0-1, and twice in the past week – Friday vs. Pittsburgh and Monday at Boston – the Blue Jackets have turned tight games into blowouts by the end when leading after two.

It might be a bit too early to call it a killer instinct, but the Blue Jackets have started to show an ability to put games away against veteran squads.

“We were just playing our game in the third period, not really holding back and playing defense,” Zach Werenski said of the Boston game. “We were on the attack, we scored some goals, and I think that’s awesome for us. It’s definitely something we can build on, especially against a good team in Boston and a tough building to play in. It’s a great third period for us and something we can build on.”

The Blue Jackets did it by getting back to what they want their identity to be – getting on the forecheck, causing turnovers and putting pressure on the opposing team.

“We didn’t do anything crazy,” Mathieu Olivier said. “We just kept putting the puck deep and pressuring them, staying above them. It seems like every time we win, we just say that, and it’s our recipe for success in this room. So, take that in our notes and move on and look forward to Thursday.”

Tonight’s game back in Nationwide, where the Blue Jackets have won four of five, presents another big challenge as a Tampa Bay team that has won plenty of games over the past few seasons. Columbus didn’t play a perfect game in Boston – especially early, when a bevy of turnovers didn’t come back to bite the team largely because of the strong play of Elvis Merzlikins – but did enough good things they feel they can carry over into tonight.

“Elvis did his job to keep us in there, and then in the end, we buckled down, we calmed down, we simplified our game,” head coach Dean Evason said. “Certainly when we had the lead, we did a lot of good things late in that third period in order to preserve the game.”

### **Know The Foe: Tampa Bay Lightning**

**Head coach:** Jon Cooper (12th season)

**Team stats:** Goals per game: 3.53 (7th) | Scoring defense: 2.76 (9th) | PP: 18.5 percent (17th) | PK: 78.2 percent (20th)

**The narrative:** The Lightning has made the playoffs in 10 of the last 11 seasons and won the 2020 and ‘21 Stanley Cups, making the squad a true NHL dynasty over more than a decade. But the signs that things are starting to wind down are there, including the offseason departure of franchise icon Steven Stamkos as well as consecutive first-round playoff exits. It’s still a veteran team with plenty of star power that knows how to win, even if it is a little long in the tooth these days.

**Team leaders:** Two-time Art Ross Trophy winner Nikita Kucherov is off to another excellent start at age 31, as the Russian wing is 10th in the NHL with 26 points, including a team-best 11 goals. Three players are next with 17 points apiece – Brandon Hagel (8-9-17), Jake Guentzel (7-10-17), Anthony Cirelli (5-12-17) and Victor Hedman (4-13-17) – while Brayden Point has 10 goals.

In net, Andrei Vasilevskiy's streak of five straight top-five finishes in the Vezina voting ended last season, but he could be back this year, as he's 9-5-1 in an NHL-best 15 starts with a 2.13 GAA and .919 save percentage.

**What's new:** The team's all-time leader in games played, goals and points, Stamkos left for Nashville in the offseason, but the Bolts found a ready-made replacement in Guentzel, a longtime CBJ killer. Defenseman Mikhail Sergachev also was dealt in the summer to Utah for talented young forward Conor Geekie and defenseman J.J. Moser. A four-game losing skid in which the Lightning gave up 4.25 goals per game has been followed by a three-game winning streak including Wednesday's OT win at Pittsburgh.

**Trending:** Columbus won one of the three contests last season, taking a 4-2 victory in Nationwide Arena in November before dropping games in February in Columbus and April in Tampa. The Bolts' consistent success has made them a tough out for the Blue Jackets, as Columbus is 5-15-4 in the series since the 2017-18 season began.

**Former CBJ:** Now 35 years old, Cam Atkinson signed a one-year deal in Tampa Bay this offseason and has played in 11 games with one assist.

Injured reserve, Injured/Non-Roster list: Kent Johnson (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (upper body), Boone Jenner (upper body)

Roster Report: Kent Johnson has been activated off injured reserve and goes into the lineup for Labanc. Jack Johnson also will return to the lineup in place of David Jiricek, who was sent to AHL Cleveland on Wednesday.

### **The Numbers Game**

Dante Fabbro has a three-game point streak (1-2-3). ... Goalie Elvis Merzlikins is 2-0-0 with a 1.50 GAA and .942 save percentage in his last two starts against Pittsburgh and Boston. ... With a goal Monday in Boston, Mathieu Olivier set a new career high with six on the season. ... Columbus has five games with six or more goals for the seventh time in franchise history. This is the first time in franchise history the team has reached that mark within the first 18 games. ... Kirill Marchenko has a 6-10-16 line in the last 17 games as well as five goals in five career games vs. Tampa Bay. ... Damon Severson is one point away from 300 in his NHL career. ... With 316 career points, Zach Werenski sits one point shy of tying David Vyborny for fifth on the CBJ's all-time points list. His 25:40 of average ice time per game is second in the NHL. ... Sean Kuraly is set to play in his 499th career game.

### **This Day in CBJ History**

**Nov. 21, 2001:** Columbus plays the first game in team history that ends in a scoreless tie following regulation play. However, Luc Robitaille's goal at 4:17 of overtime gives Detroit a 1-0 win. Defenseman Deron Quint skates 33:18 in the game, still a franchise record for an OT game.

**Nov. 21, 2004:** The Blue Jackets claim center Manny Malhotra off waivers from Dallas. He'd go on to play 344 games over five seasons with the team, scoring 53 goals with 145 points.

**Nov, 21, 2019:** The Blue Jackets add Paul MacLean to the coaching staff as an assistant coach/special teams. MacLean was a finalist for the Jack Adams Award as the NHL's best coach with Ottawa in 2011-12 and 2012-13, capturing the award the latter season.

## [BlueJackets.com / Werenski's winner lifts Blue Jackets past Lightning](#)

By Craig Merz – November 22, 2024

Werenski had two goals and three assists, Sean Monahan had a goal and three assists, and Kent Johnson scored twice in his return after missing the past 14 games with a shoulder injury for the Blue Jackets. Elvis Merzlikins made 24 saves.

Nikita Kucherov had three assists to surpass 900 NHL points for the Lightning (10-6-2). Anthony Cirelli, Brandon Hagel, Mitchell Chaffee and Conor Geekie each had a goal and an assist, and Jonas Johansson made 36 saves.

Despite jumping out to a 3-0 lead in the first period, the Lightning were unable to hold on and their three-game winning streak ended.

“Give a ton of credit to Columbus,” Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. “They didn’t care they were down 3-0. They were like, ‘It’s a 60-minute game, we’ll see what we can do to win this.’ Clearly, we didn’t have that same mindset. In the end, probably the right team won tonight.”

Brayden Point gave the Lightning a 1-0 lead at 1:51 of the first period with a power-play goal, scoring a one-timer below the right circle off a pass from the right corner by Kucherov.

Hagel pushed it to 2-0 at 3:58 with a one-timer off a touch pass from Kucherov.

Cam Atkinson scored his first goal for the Lightning after signing as a free agent on July 2 to make it 3-0 at 11:52 with a redirect of Victor Hedman’s shot.

“Usually when you get up 3-0 in the first period, that’s a pretty good lead and good teams do the right things,” Atkinson said. “We got away from our game plan and made it a track meet and ended up getting the result that, honestly, we deserved.”

Monahan cut the deficit to 3-1 at 13:35 after the puck caromed off the back wall to him at the left post.

Dmitri Voronkov’s breakaway goal 28 seconds into the second period made it 3-2, then Johnson’s one-timer from the right circle tied it 3-3 at 1:55 on the power play.

“We’re all pros. We’re all going to play pretty hard. It was definitely a nice comeback,” Johnson said.

Chaffee responded to put the Lightning ahead 4-3 at 2:11, but Werenski scored from the right circle to tie it 4-4 at 3:42.

Yegor Chinakhov gave Columbus a 5-4 lead at 5:26 with a wrist shot from the left circle on the rush, then Cirelli converted a centering pass from Hagel to tie it 5-5 at 6:18.

Johnson put Columbus back ahead 6-5 at 10:39 of the third period with a short-handed goal.

“Some guys come back their first time and it’s just throwing pucks away,” Columbus coach Dean Evason said of Johnson. “They’re jittery and struggle in different areas. He didn’t. He just wants to play hockey.”

Geekie scored on the power play to tie it 6-6 at 11:23.

“A lot of guys stepped up in different ways, whether it’s on the kill, blocking shots, or tracking and doing the little things,” Monahan said. “That keeps the team well-rounded.”

**NOTES:** Werenski has nine points (three goals, six assists) in a four-game point streak. ... Johnson became the eighth player in Blue Jackets history to score a short-handed and a power-play goal in the same game. The last to do that was Jack Roslovic (Dec. 11, 2022). ... Kucherov has 902 points (331 goals,

571 assists) in 743 games. ... Hedman has five points (goal, four assists) in a four-game point streak. ... Lightning forward Gage Goncalves got his first NHL point in his eighth game with an assist on Geekie's goal.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets (16 pts) vs. Tampa Bay Lightning (21 pts) Game Preview

By Jason Newland – November 22, 2024

The Tampa Bay Lightning are in Columbus tonight to take on the Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena.

Tampa comes into this game with a three-game winning streak on the line. They're also 6-3-1 in the last 10 games and sit third in the Atlantic.

The Lightning are 17th on the power play which is not the norm, as they're usually in the top 10 on the power play. The Jackets give up the 7th fewest PIMs in the league and need to continue that trend. They can't let the Lightning PP get into a rhythm, so limiting their chances will help.

If the Blue Jackets can get Jonas Johansson, they may have a chance in this game. Andrei Vasilevskiy has been hot and recently won his 300th NHL game, so avoiding him altogether could be the key to this game for the Jackets.

The Jackets will also get Kent Johnson back tonight, which should help the offense if he can get his game back.

The Lightning are currently 3rd in the Atlantic, 7th in the East, and 14th in the league.

### **Series History vs. The Lightning**

- Columbus is 10-12-3 at home vs. the Lightning and 15-27-7 in all meetings.
- The Jackets are 4-4-2 in the last 10 against Tampa Bay at NWA.

### **Who To Watch For The Lightning**

- Nikita Kucherov has 40 points in 27 games vs. the CBJ. He also has 26 points this season.
- Victor Hedman has recorded 28 points in 38 games against Columbus. He has 17 points on the season.
- Andrei Vasilevskiy is 9-5 with a .919 save %. He won his last start on Tuesday vs. Pittsburgh.
- Jonas Johansson is 1-1 with a save % of .866%.
- Former Blue Jacket Cam Atkinson has one point in 11 games.

### **CBJ Player Notes vs. The Lightning**

- James van Riemsdyk has 32 points in 44 games vs. the Bolts.
- Zach Werenski has 13 points in 21 games.
- Kirill Marchenko has 6 points in 5 games.

### **Injuries**

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (17 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (14 Games)

**TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 76**

**How to Watch & Listen:** Tonight's game will be on **FanDuel Sports Network**. Steve Mears will be on the play-by-play. The radio broadcast will be on **97.1 The Fan** with Bob McElligott behind the mic doing the play-by-play.

## [The Hockey News / Kent Johnson Activated From IR And Will Play Tonight vs. Tampa Bay](#)

**By Jason Newland – November 22, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets have activated forward Kent Johnson off of IR today. Johnson hasn't played since October 17th against the Buffalo Sabres.

In those three games and change that he played, he scored two goals and had five points. He seemed to be on a mission to make this the best season of his career so far before he went down to a fluke injury.

At practice on Wednesday, it was reported that he was also skating on the first power play unit with Werenski, Marchenko, Monahan, and Voronkov.

Johnson's fans will be excited to see him back on the ice against the Lightning tonight.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets are back home on Thursday to face the Tampa Bay Lightning.

## The Hockey News / CNBC's Releases NHL Team Valuations 2024: Blue Jackets Rank 32nd

**By Spencer Lazary – November 22, 2024**

CNBC has released their 2024 NHL team valuations, and the Columbus Blue Jackets ranked 32nd in the league.

The article headlines that the average NHL franchise is worth \$1.92 billion. It also highlights what every NHL team is worth.

The top team, to no surprise, is the Toronto Maple Leafs, valued at \$4 billion. That is followed by the New York Rangers (\$3.5B), Montreal Canadiens (\$3.1B), Los Angeles Kings (\$2.85B), and to round out the top five, the Boston Bruins (\$2.75B).

### **Other notable teams are:**

- 6. Edmonton Oilers: \$2.65 billion
- 7. Chicago Blackhawks: \$2.6 billion
- 10. Detroit Red Wings: \$2.05 billion
- 14. Vegas Golden Knights: \$1.85 billion
- 17. Pittsburgh Penguins: \$1.75 billion
- 20. Seattle Kraken: \$1.6 billion
- 28. Utah Hockey Club: \$1.2 billion
- 31. Winnipeg Jets: \$1.1 billion

Lastly, in last place at 32, the Blue Jackets are worth \$1 billion; they have \$148 million in revenue, which is owned by John McConnell and Nationwide. The Blue Jackets also have a 13% debt as % of value, which is in 25th in the NHL.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets GM Waddell Provides Updates on Lindstrom & Jiricek

**By Mark Scheig – November 22, 2024**

What started as a seemingly business as usual Wednesday turned into an action-packed day in news for the Columbus Blue Jackets. One part was expected. The other part not as much.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell spoke to the media on Wednesday morning at Nationwide Arena. Usually when the team calls for a press conference on short notice, it is for a significant update.

Waddell didn't waste any time and jumped right into things. He had a significant injury update to share.

### **Lindstrom Update**

Cayden Lindstrom, the Blue Jackets fourth-overall pick at the 2024 NHL Draft, underwent what is called a discectomy procedure. According to the Cleveland Clinic, a discectomy is a surgery to remove part or all of a disk in your spine. It's for herniated disks that don't respond to nonsurgical treatment.

Lindstrom has been in Columbus rehabbing since the start of training camp. The hope was for him to get 100% before being assigned back to his junior team the Medicine Hat Tigers.

However according to Waddell, Lindstrom could only get to 90%. They decided that surgery would be the best course of action to get over the hump and get to 100%. The team believes there will be a full recovery. They also believe he will play hockey this season.

Here is some of what Waddell had to say about the decision to have Lindstrom go through surgery.

"He's been working, doing everything that we've asked for him," Waddell said. "But he's got to a point where he can't get to 100%. It's been 90% or so. Our doctors recommended him to do a procedure called a discectomy. They performed that yesterday. Everything went short, the procedure and everything went well."

"They felt what they saw is exactly what they thought they would see. His recovery will be back to 100% and hopefully, play hockey again this season."

Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell expects Cayden Lindstrom to get to 100% and hopefully play hockey this season. (Photo credit: Mark Scheig, the Hockey Writers)

With this surgery, Lindstrom "won't do a whole lot" for the next 30 days. After that, he can start to get back into a routine centered around rehab.

Waddell said they knew this was a possibility. The doctors were good with trying a non-surgical approach first. Once they determined that they went as far as they could go, they opted for the surgery.

To give you a sense of what Lindstrom's situation looked like, Waddell offered up some additional information as best he could knowing he is not a doctor.

"From what I understand, there was pressure on the spine from the nerve," Waddell said. "So there is a tiny little fragment that they saw on the MRI that they just had to shave off."

The doctors believe this is a one-time procedure that should not have any lasting effects moving forward. Waddell did say that the injury didn't occur with the Blue Jackets. "I believe because he wasn't here, it was lifting weights when he did it when he was coming back from a rehab assignment."

Assuming all goes well, Lindstrom would join Medicine Hat for their stretch run to the playoffs. The Blue Jackets always took the long approach with him. While losing development time is never ideal, making sure he's 100% was their top priority. They hope with this surgery, he will finally get to that threshold.

### **Jiricek Update**

Earlier on Wednesday, the Blue Jackets sent both Mikael Pyyhtia and David Jiricek to the Cleveland Monsters. With Kent Johnson on target to play Thursday night, the team needed roster space.

By sending both Pyyhtia and Jiricek down, the Blue Jackets' roster stands at 21. Once Johnson is officially activated from injured reserve, that will make 22. Suddenly, the team has some flexibility on roster space that could go a number of ways in the near future.

Waddell spoke about the decision to send Jiricek to the Monsters. His recent performances told the team this was the best course of action at this time.

"I watched him last year when I got the opportunity to come here for the playoffs in Cleveland and thought he played very, very well not just defensively, but offensively. And for whatever reason, it hasn't gone as smoothly, the transition to the NHL...But his confidence, we can tell just watching the other night, he's worried about making that mistake. So we just made a decision. Let him go play games in Cleveland and we'll see how it goes."

Waddell said that there was a meeting with Jiricek to explain what he needed to work on. Head coach Dean Evason was in that meeting also. Evason believes there are no issues whatsoever after that meeting. Waddell said that he hopes Jiricek goes out there with a good attitude and continues to grow in his career.

Meanwhile, trade speculation has picked up in the Jiricek situation. Waddell said teams have called him. While the price of any trade involving Jiricek would be high, the GM didn't rule it out either.

"I have to listen to every trade offer," Waddell said. "It doesn't matter what the player's name is. We could make our team better. We always gotta look at those options. Certainly, we've gotten calls and we'll continue to talk to whoever is interested in whichever player, if something makes sense for this organization."

"I've never made a personal decision ever in my career. It's always what's best for the organization. If there's something that makes sense, certainly we'll look at it."

Jiricek now has a chance to play with Denton Mateychuk on the Monsters' top defensive pair in what would be one of the best young pairs in the AHL.

Jiricek is still just 20 years old. His upside remains high. Evason said on Wednesday that Jiricek needs to work on his game away from the puck. This is a case in which there are clear areas of focus that the player needs to work on to be ready for a full-time NHL role.

While there will always be trade speculation when a top prospect goes through a situation like this, Jiricek is not alone in finding his game. Simon Nemec of the New Jersey Devils is on a similar course.

The Blue Jackets certainly haven't given up on Jiricek. But they are open to listening to offers if an opportunity presents itself. For now, Jiricek has a chance to play a lot and work on his game. It's now on him to make the most of this opportunity.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Win Wild Game Over Lightning Thanks to Werenski's Career Night

**By Mark Scheig – November 22, 2024**

The game is never over until the final buzzer or an overtime winner is scored. The Columbus Blue Jackets saw that experience play out firsthand on Thursday night.

Despite trailing 3-0 within the first 12 minutes, the Blue Jackets fought back and earned a 7-6 overtime win over the Tampa Bay Lightning. Defenseman Zach Werenski scored five points including two goals and the game winner in overtime. Sean Monahan added four points to help erase a dreadful start to the game.

The story of this game was the many twists and turns it took.

### **Game Recap**

The Lightning didn't wait long to jump out to that 3-0 lead. Goals from Brayden Point and Brandon Hagele not even four minutes in quieted the building on Hockey Fights Cancer night.

Former Blue Jacket Cam Atkinson then deflected home his first goal of the season to make it 3-0. The game then turned less than two minutes later thanks to Monahan.

Monahan was in the right place at the right time to deposit a rebound into an open net. Not only did it make it 3-1, it jumpstarted the Blue Jackets.

The Blue Jackets then dominated long stretches of the game from a shot attempts perspective. By night's end, they had over 90 attempts.

The second period featured a total of six goals to turn a 3-1 game into a 5-5 game. Goals by Dmitri Voronkov and Kent Johnson made it 3-3. Mitchell Chaffee scored immediately after to make it 4-3. Werenski and Yegor Chinakhov scored in quick succession to make it 5-4 only to have Anthony Cirelli tie the game. It was pond hockey at its finest.

The game calmed down considerably in the third. But on a Lightning power play, the teams traded goals. Kent Johnson scored shorthanded while Conor Geekie made it 6-6 on the same power play.

Regulation was unable to solve this back and forth game. In the overtime, Werenski converted his second of the night past Jonas Johansson to send the fans home happy.

The Blue Jackets outshot the Lightning 43-30 for the game including 35-18 from the second period on. Elvis Merzlikins got the win while stopping just 24 of 30. Johansson suffered the loss despite 36 saves.

The Blue Jackets will host the Carolina Hurricanes on Saturday in Jack Roslovic and Eric Robinson's return to Nationwide Arena. The Lightning head home to host the Dallas Stars in what should be a great game.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Game Day #19: Kent Johnson Returns To The Lineup As Blue Jackets Host The Tampa Bay Lightning

**By Ed Francis – November 22, 2024**

Kent Johnson is back.

The Columbus Blue Jackets activated the young forward off injured and he is in the lineup for Thursday night's game against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

All indications are that he'll play on the wing opposite of James van Riemsdyk and centered by Adam Fantilli. Head coach Dean Evason has been looking for a spark to plug in on Fantilli's line since Johnson had went out October 17th, to mixed results. His return to the ice adds not only a playmaker to the Columbus lineup, but provides a more balanced offensive attack.

Balance is a key to beating the Lightning, who come to Columbus on a three-game winning streak. They had a season-high 68 shot attempts in their overtime win Tuesday against Pittsburgh, and any team with Nikita Kucherov on it is one to be careful against.

- The sample size was small, but Johnson sure looked to be early on in a breakout season when he was injured. He had two goals and three assists in just 67 minutes through the four games he played and was driving the play when on the ice.
- There's some shuffling in the defensive pairings, with Damon Severson and Jack Johnson together for the first time this season. With Johnson a rotating defenseman so far this season, it could be an indication that the team isn't seeing enough from Severson to warrant the bigger minutes.
- Depending on how one defines "best", Elvis Merzlikins had his best start of the season Monday against the Boston Bruins. It wasn't a shutout and it wasn't the most saves he's made in a game, but Merzly was made a number of significant saves, particularly early on when the game was up for grabs. He's between the pipes again Thursday and is cementing himself as the team's number one goalie for the first time in several seasons.
- With Johnson in the lineup, that means that Kevin Labanc comes out. On the defensive side of things, Jack Johnson is back in the lineup in place of David Jiricek, who was loaned to the Cleveland Monsters on Wednesday.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Werenski Caps Off Career Night With Overtime Winner As Blue Jackets Outlast Bolts 7-6

By Will Chase – November 22, 2024

If you like goal-scoring, this one was for you.

The Columbus Blue Jackets overcame a 3-0 first-period deficit to outlast the Tampa Bay Lightning 7-6 in overtime on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Zach Werenski scored in overtime and set a franchise record becoming the first Blue Jackets defenseman with five points (two goals, three assists) in a single game. Sean Monahan scored as part of a four-point night (one goal, three assists) and took over the team lead for goals. Werenski (six goals, 13 assists) and Monahan (seven goals, 12 assists) co-lead the Blue Jackets with 19 points.

Kent Johnson returned from an upper-body injury after missing the previous 14 games and scored a power-play goal and short-handed. Johnson is on a five-game point streak (four goals, three assists).

Elvis Merzizkins made 24 saves for his third straight win. Jonas Johansson made 36 saves in defeat.

### Here's how it all went down:

#### 1st Period:

**(1:51 — TBL Goal):** Brayden Point started the goal fest with his 11th tally of the season on the power play. Nikita Kucherov (16) and Jake Guentzel (11) picked up the assists. Point has five goals in his last four games.

**(3:58 — TBL Goal):** Brandon Hagel's ninth of the year added to the Lightning lead. Kucherov added his second assist of the game for his 17th of the season and the 900th point of his career. Anthony Cirelli added his 13th helper.

**(11:52 — TBL Goal):** Cam Atkinson scored his first of the season and his first as a member of the Lightning. Victor Hedman (14) and Mitchell Chaffee (3) had the assists. Atkinson sat out the last three games as a healthy scratch entering play.

**(13:35 — CBJ Goal):** Columbus stopped the bleeding as Monahan scored his team-leading seventh goal of the season to break a nine-game goalless drought. The goal was the beginning of Monahan's four-point (one goal, three assists) night—Dmitri Voronkov (2) and Damon Severson (5) assisted on the play. The point was the 300th of Severson's career.

#### 2nd Period:

**(0:28 — CBJ Goal):** Voronkov started the second period just as the Jackets needed with his fourth goal of the year. Monahan added his second point of the night with the assist and Damon Severson's assist on the play was the 300th point of his career.

**(1:55 — CBJ Goal):** Kent Johnson returned to the lineup and picked up right where he left off with his fifth goal of the season to tie the game 3-3 on the power play. Werenski (12), Kirill Marchenko (11) assisted.

**(2:11 — TBL Goal):** Mitchell Chaffee's fifth goal of the season gave Tampa the lead back to make it 4-3. Conor Geekie (3) had an assist.

**(3:42 — CBJ Goal):** Werenski added his second point of the evening with his fifth goal to make it a 4-4 hockey game. Kirill Marchenko (12) and Monahan (11) added the assists.

**(5:26 — CBJ Goal):** Yegor Chinakhov's sixth goal gave Columbus a 5-4 lead. The assists went to Cole Sillinger (8) and Mathieu Olivier (3).

**(5:26 — TBL Goal):** Anthony Cirelli (6) tied the game at 5-5 as the assists went to Hagel (10) and Kucherov (18).

The Blue Jackets had a season-high 21 shots for a period in the second frame.

### **3rd Period:**

**(10:39 — CBJ Goal):** Kent Johnson added a short-hand goal for his second goal of the game and his second career multi-goal game. Werenski and Monahan each added their third assist of the night.

**(11:23 — TBL Goal):** Geekie's third of the season on the power play made it a 6-6 game with assists to Gage Goncalves (1) and Janis Moser (6).

### **Overtime:**

**(1:25 — CBJ Goal):** Werenski capped off a career night with his first-career five-point game as he scored the overtime winner to cap off the wild 7-6 victory. Sillinger (9) and Ivan Provorov (5) assisted on the play. Werenski led the game with eight shots — the second time this season he's had eight shots in a game — and he led the way in ice time (27:24)

### **Stat Talk:**

- The Blue Jackets have scored at least five goals in seven of their eight victories. They beat the New York Islanders 2-0 at Nationwide Arena on Oct. 30 and they beat the Boston Bruins 5-1 last time out in Boston on Nov. 18.
- Kent Johnson's third-period short-handed goal gives Columbus three short-handed goals in their last two games. Mathieu Oliver and Justin Danforth each scored shorties against the Bruins.
- The 7-6 comeback victory marks the seventh time in franchise history — third time at home — the Blue Jackets have overcome a three-goal deficit to win. The last time the Blue Jackets won a game that way was over the Washington Capitals 7-6 in overtime on Mar. 21, 2023, in D.C. The last time at home was 5-4 over the Detroit Red Wings on Apr. 3, 2018.

### **Up Next:**

The homestand continues as the Blue Jackets play the Metropolitan Division-leading Carolina Hurricanes with the puck drop set for 7:00 p.m.

## The Athletic / The future NHL goalie is an elite skater and brainy thinker — with a strong butt

By Fluto Shinzawa and Jesse Granger – November 22, 2024

CANTON, Mass. — “You know bumper boats?” Cam Earle, Massachusetts Hockey goalie coach-in-chief, asks the 12 youth hockey goalies on the Canton Sportsplex ice on Sept. 15.

Heads nod. Earle explains they will be playing bumper goalies. They are to skate backward in their stance and, with their butts, knock down anyone in the way. Last one standing wins.

Mayhem follows. Competition kicks in. Goalies tumble.

But positional fundamentals rule the day.

“It teaches leg strength, backward skating, movement, balance if there’s body contact,” Earle said of the drill. “It’s great for your players, too. Because it teaches them body contact, how to stay up, how to look around, scan, use their head and keep their head up.”

The drill is most commonly used for younger goalies, but even the pros enjoy the fun competition from time to time. A group of adult goalies — many of whom play collegiately or professionally — competed in a heated game of bumper goalies at the Goalie Guild’s Global Goaltending Retreat in Breckenridge, Colo., this summer.

The winner of Earle’s drill in Canton was an under-14 goalie with red trim on his Bauer pads. He bested his peers by being precise with his movements, dialed in to his surroundings, strong in his stance, balanced on his edges and quick to close on his targets. It did not hurt that his rear end was stronger than that of others.

This is the NHL goalie of the future.

### **51 in 30**

Every generation has a specific look. Patrick Roy defined the butterfly. Martin Brodeur did a bit of everything: handle the puck, stay on his feet, mix in two-pad stacks. Jonathan Quick eliminated everything down low by mastering the reverse vertical-horizontal.

Today’s stewards, be they Connor Hellebuyck or Igor Shesterkin or Andrei Vasilevskiy, hold their edges, anticipate plays and emphasize post integration. The future, even beyond next-generation prospects such as Yaroslav Askarov, Jacob Fowler and Jesper Wallstedt, remains malleable.

Not long ago, coaches had a default for selecting who was in net: the big and maybe quirky kid who couldn’t skate well enough to play out. That does not fly anymore.

The NHL works at 5G speed. Wizards such as Auston Matthews have worked with skills coaches their whole lives. Stick technology has progressed to the point where Matthews can catch, release and hit his mark with the puck in one motion. Analytics give Matthews and his linemates intel on which types of passes and shots produce goals.

A blocker-style goalie like Jean-Sebastien Giguere would be out of his depth. Superior skating is mandatory.

“You watch Henrik Lundqvist in the early 2000s and you watch Jonny Quick, those guys were really in the pocket of the evolution of goaltending. Marty Brodeur,” said Jeremy Swayman. “It has been amazing

to see the change. Because these guys in front of us are changing, too. These shooters are able to shoot, make plays differently and have releases.”

It wasn't that long ago that goalies with a high hockey IQ could think their way around the crease to make up for skating deficiencies. Those days are gone.

“I do believe that when the game was a little bit slower, the goalies who weren't elite skaters but were elite thinkers looked fast because they were able to get to their spots quickly,” said David Lassonde, goaltending coach for the United States National Team Development Program. “It wasn't necessarily because they were unbelievable skaters, but they were unbelievable readers of the play. But I think today, because of the speed and deception of the game, the number of lateral and vertical passing plays, and the speed at which they're done, I don't think you can just rely on your brain as much as you did in your past. You have to have the elite combination of mobility and high IQ.”

Lassonde has coached goalies for more than 35 years in college and for the USNTDP. He has worked with some of the best American goalies, including Thatcher Demko and John Gibson, and the younger generation such as Spencer Knight, Dustin Wolf and Trey Augustine. He believes as the sport continues to become faster and more skilled, goalies of the future will need exceptional edge work and understanding of offensive tactics to stay ahead of the play.

“I just think their east-west rotations and lateral movement, whether on their feet or off their feet, have to be so much better,” Lassonde said.

With skating at the forefront, goaltending practitioners are emphasizing down-the-road growth. That night in September, Earle was leading a clinic for local goalies and coaches.

Part of Earle's mandate is to promote 51 in 30, USA Hockey's initiative for 51 percent of the minutes in men's and women's pro hockey to be played by American goalies by 2030. USA Hockey is on track to thrive in net for the 2026 Olympics. Candidates include Hellebuyck (Commerce, Mich.), Swayman (Anchorage, Alaska) and Jake Oettinger (Lakeville, Minn.).

“We want to make American goaltending the most elite system in the world,” Earle said. “We're obviously working at the highest level, where we're trying to win gold medals. But you can't do that without working at the grassroots level.”

Imminent strength does not guarantee future continuation. It's why coaches like Earle are intent on increasing goalie supply.

At the U-8 level, the notion is known as pass the pads. All skaters have a chance to play goal, even between periods. USA Hockey's updated version of the Gordie Howe hat trick is a goal, assist and save.

The initiative's intention is that by the U-10 level, every team has four to six kids interested in minding the net. That way, a family no longer feels the pressure of choosing a game over a Disney vacation because their kid is the team's only goalie. There is strength in numbers.

“A lot of times, you'll have parents, because they're so hyper-focused on, ‘My kid needs to be the one to develop a million miles an hour,’” Earle said, “they oftentimes develop an attitude that, ‘I only want to put my kid on a team where he'll be the only goalie and he'll get all the playing time.’ Which is unhealthy for their development. Because you need that healthy and friendly competition, in order to get better.”

The concept is simple. The deeper the goaltending pool is at all age levels, the odds of a breakthrough improve.



“Say you hit at a 25 percent rate of starting to look at a special talent with goalies,” Earle said. “If you only have one, you’ve got a one-in-four chance. But if you have four, if you have eight, you should have at least one or two that could make the jump to the next level.”

Steve Thompson, who worked with Swayman while he was growing up in Alaska and is now the head of goaltending development for USA Hockey, believes the future of goaltending development should include less goaltending.

“I really think hockey goaltending is heading in the same direction as baseball pitching,” he explained. “I’m hopeful and excited to see more people sharing the net, and I think what we’re going to find by doing that are so many benefits to performance, where people will have a shorter duration that they have to be rockstars for, and they can go in and shut the door for a period, or maybe half a game.

“I think it will have so many benefits mentally and physically, with so many of the hip issues we’ve been seeing with young athletes all the way to the professional athletes. There will be a lot of resistance to it, but I really think that is going to be the step forward for a healthier, higher-performing position.”

Grassroots emphasis should produce more talented goalies in junior, college and pro. The question is how they’ll play the position.

Smart, competitive skaters

In terms of technique, Knight is a goaltending dream. The 6-foot-3, 191-pound Florida Panthers goalie shuffles precisely and rapidly. He holds his feet. He reads plays. The No. 13 pick from 2019, the first goalie drafted that year, explodes when necessary.

The 23-year-old’s next step is finding NHL consistency.

“What I’ve been getting to — I guess you could sort of call it technique — is letting my intuition take over at certain times,” said the Panthers’ No. 2 goalie. “And building those habits to where I almost don’t think about doing that. It just becomes second nature. That’s essentially when you get really good at something. You don’t have to think about it. You just do it.”

Knight spent all of 2023-24 in the AHL while dealing with obsessive compulsive disorder. His challenge is not unique. The position can wear goalies down because of its stress.

“It’s up here,” said Jeremy Flibotte, director of Stop It Goaltending, pointing to his temple. “The older they get, I say it’s less physical. It’s more mental. Because you do so much of the muscle memorization of doing the same thing that it just stays. It’s up here.”

“If you can’t turn that on, this,” Flibotte continued, pushing his left hand out to mimic a blocker save, “isn’t going to work. You’re not going to be able to hit your post and do all this other stuff. For me, the biggest thing you have to have, day in and day out, is the mental side. Find a way to prepare the same way every time. Listen to music. Meditation. Whatever it is, there has to be a switch.”

If the brain is firing, a goalie can practically see the future. Flibotte raises the example of one attacker controlling the puck below the goal line with a teammate open out front.

In that situation, the goalie seals the strong-side post using reverse vertical-horizontal to negate the jam play. At the same time, the goalie has to identify a pass-out possibility. If that happens, a smart goalie knows to pop out of RVH, follow the pass, skate to the spot and square up to the shot. It is an anticipatory save that looks easier than it is.

“I drill them on post work and crease management. Because they have to be able to do it without a shot or a puck or an actual play,” Flibotte said. “Just do it. It’s the mental side of creating a play in your brain

of, 'Why am I doing this? Why am I going post to my 45?' I can mentally say, 'Oh, they're going to pass out to the faceoff dot.'"

Over the last two decades goalie coaching has become more and more technical, with coaches and goalies often practicing alone on an empty sheet of ice, hammering positions until perfect. While that has had some benefits, it could also be part of the reason save percentage has dropped in the NHL for nine consecutive seasons.

"I think we've been on this slippery slope for 20 years now, where we're really diving into the technique and really isolating our skills," Thompson said. "It's been beneficial. We're a lot more efficient in a lot of these movements than we were so long ago, but where I think we've swung too far on that pendulum is we're forgetting to think about hockey as a game and a chess match. We're forgetting the importance of understanding the entire game and not just maybe the degree of angle we're getting into our post, and the exact timing of our pushes, and all of that.

"Today's modern goalie is very puck-centered, and the puck determines what they do. There's reality to that, but I think the future goaltender is going to be a lot more aware of the players off the puck, and understand it's not necessarily where the puck is now, but where the puck is about to go."

Lassonde believes the four pillars of the future goalie are elite thinking, skating, compete level and body control. The fourth is becoming increasingly important because of how deceptive scorers are. Lassonde defines body control as balance and athleticism throughout a play, which allow the goalie to react quickly and precisely to unexpected bounces or decisions by the skaters.

"I think a lot of goalies are pretty good at staying athletic, balanced and connected when they have to move once, but the question is, can they do it a second or third time?" he explained. "Think about broken plays, where you think something is going to happen and you react to it, then all of a sudden it doesn't happen and you have to react. Does the way you move the first time allow you to move a second time?"

To train this, Lassonde has his goalies begin skating drills by leaping off the ice, then landing and immediately going into the skating move. Landing on skate edges, absorbing the impact of the jump with proper knee flexion and having the balance to seamlessly begin a skating move, is incredibly difficult. It magnifies any flaws in the stance and shows goaltender areas of body control they need to improve on to help react during the play.

Even the skating moves themselves could be transforming over the next several years, as some experts believe T-pushes are the biggest culprit for all of the hip impingements and injuries we've seen across the goaltending world. Thompson and those at USA Hockey are still hoping to collect more data on the subject, but other European governing bodies have been more aggressive.

"We want to make sure that our recommendations are research-based with data, and not just a gut reaction," Thompson explained. "We have been partnering with the Swedish ice hockey federation on some things, and reached out to some other governing bodies. We know there's a prevalence of injury, and we don't exactly know why. The T-push is one of the targets. I think the Finns have been pretty adamant in a lot of their youth development of trying to remove T-pushes out of their game, because they feel strongly that it is that sheer force, with the stop and the internal rotation that's causing a lot of the hip impingements."

T-pushes are a vital tool in any goalie's skating repertoire, mostly used to cover a lot of ground when the attacking team passes the puck laterally, but the sharp, violent stop at the end of the push puts a lot of stress on a hip's internal rotation. The thought is that replacing those moves with more C-cuts and shuffles – which put less stress on the body – could minimize long-term hip problems for goalies.

“Before we put out a lot of recommendations to remove T-pushes, we just want to make sure the data shows that’s reality,” Thompson said.

The future NHL goalie’s brain needs to be wired for more than hockey sense. It has to manage a goalie’s competitiveness. Every play requires contesting.

“A never-give-up attitude,” Earle said. “You’re not going to have a goalie who ever gives up on a puck. You’re playing until the very, very, very last second. If there’s a series, you’re not giving up on any puck unless it’s in your glove or in the net.”

In-tune brains will encourage goalies to stay on their feet as long as possible. A goalie who goes down closes off multiple pathways to making saves.

Think of the goalie who drops into the butterfly and slides laterally if a shooter lifts his stick for a one-timer. Recovery is nearly impossible if the shooter fakes a shot and whips a slot-line pass to a linemate instead.

Conversely, the goalie who stays up has more options available: shuffle to a spot, T-push the other way, slide only when needed.

“It’s your ability to use your edges in the most diverse array possible,” Earle said. “If you have to move from point A to point B, you can move there efficiently in two or three different ways. Then you can recover and you have the ability to move another way.”

Goalies with the widest toolkits will read the situation, skate to their spots and select the optimal save. Those goalies will look faster and bigger than they are. Shooters will shake their heads and question their goal-scoring abilities.

Attitude matters.

“There’s a reason Shesterkin wants \$11 million,” said Flibotte. “He can turn the switch on and off when he wants. That’s the swagger, the cockiness. ‘I’m the guy. I’m the guy in net. They chose me to go play.’”

## [The Athletic / NHL player poll: Proposed rule changes, from 3-on-3 to goalie interference to video review and more](#)

**The Athletic NHL Staff – November 22, 2024**

It's the kind of question that can be pretty difficult to answer on the spot. The kind of question that prompts a player to come back to you the next day with four more suggestions he thought of since you originally asked it.

### **What's one rule change you would make to the NHL?**

And it turns out players have as many gripes about the sport they love as the rest of us do. Stars: They're just like us.

In fact, we received so many different responses to this one — on such a wide variety of topics and aspects of the game — from the 161 players we polled that we could only fit a fraction of them in the original story. So here's the best of the rest, an overflowing suggestion box for the league offices in New York and Toronto.

### **Overtime**

Like just about everybody else, the players want to see fewer shootouts. And the easiest way to ensure that is by extending three-on-three overtime.

"Continuous overtime; abolish the shootout."

"Instead of shootouts, three-on-three, then two-on-two. ... It could be kind of fun. But then it would be tough with the stats because it could change things."

"Ten-minute overtimes. I just think overtime's the best for the fans. I think for the players, it's fun, too."

"Longer overtime. The less shootouts, the better. ... I think there's nobody in my opinion that doesn't love watching three-on-three."

That said, overtime has gotten less chaotic — and therefore less fun — in recent seasons, as teams realized the importance of possession above all else. With so many game-winners being scored off turnovers or harmless shots that spring odd-man rushes the other way, teams have gotten more and more patient. And the endless regroupings have dulled some of the excitement.

One player called for a shot clock, but an over-and-back rule like in basketball was the popular choice in our poll.

"Backcourt violation in OT: You can't cross the red line."

Some players got even more creative with loosening up overtime.

"No offside during three-on-three play. Put some risk into this. You could have two guys back defending and the other guy hanging out in the neutral zone."

"A (power play) in overtime should be three-on-two not four-on-three."

"I would make it so that the blue line is not offside. Once you cross the red line, that's like the new blue line and you can take it back past the red with your feet or with the puck. Everybody's got to touch up or it's some sort of penalty. They've got to change the overtime rules, for sure."

### **Power plays**

The league wants more goals, right? Several players had a simple solution to that one.

“Two-minute major. Power plays shouldn’t end if a goal is scored.”

Quite a few others echoed that. But again, some players had some novel concepts.

“If you score on the delayed penalty, you should still get a power play.”

“If you’re on the power play and a period ends, the next period — even if it’s overtime — starts with an offensive-zone faceoff.”

“If the leading team takes a penalty with under two minutes remaining, the trailing team should get the full power play. I think if the team that’s leading takes a penalty with less than two minutes left, the team that’s trailing should get the full two-minute power play. Sometimes you could be up a goal, and there’s 20 seconds left and you’re slashing and whacking, and just no rules apply.”

On the other side of the power play, several players advocated for a rule adopted by the PWHL.

“The PWHL jailbreak. A shorthanded goal results in the player leaving the box.”

“If you score shorthanded, the power play ends. In Europe, if you’re on the power play and you get scored on (shorthanded), the power play’s over. I like that.”

### **Video challenges**

Yes, NHL players have a lot of thoughts on replay challenges, too. Again, stars: They’re just like us.

“Eliminate offside review. These offsides that are a centimeter off when the league is preaching scoring more and more, it’s stupid.”

“It should be up to technology. Why don’t we have cameras inside the boards on the blue lines for something absolute?”

Some players tried to find some nuance in the current system.

“If it’s a goal off the rush and it’s offside, it should be overturned. But if you’re offside entering the zone and then work the puck around for 30 seconds, it shouldn’t be.”

“Thirty seconds after an offside, cannot be challenged.”

“If it’s been a minute-long shift since the offside, they should let it go. There should be a time limit of 10 or 15 seconds for the review.”

Some players wanted more offside challenges.

“So if a player was offside, and there was a goal, you challenge — no goal. But if the play goes offside and we take a penalty, you can’t challenge? That makes no sense. If you can take away a goal, why can’t you take away a penalty that 30 percent of the time leads to a goal?”

“Sometimes it would be good to challenge more things, because in the playoffs I feel like one penalty could change everything. Like diving, it could change a game.”

“Challenges for too many men.”

“You should be allowed one challenge for a penalty called against you. Like if you think it was a missed call or something bad, kind of like (how) the NBA will challenge a foul. I wouldn’t mind seeing that. Just one a game, you get just to say, ‘Hey, we don’t think that was a penalty.’ You use it or you don’t. It couldn’t happen. There’s bad calls all the time.”

Another player just wanted to get rid of the penalty for a failed challenge. Cut the video coaches some slack, man.

“Sometimes the margin of error is so small.”

Goaltender interference

Yeah, players have no idea what goalie interference is, either. They must not have read Down Goes Brown.

“Clarify goalie interference.”

“Make goalie interference a little bit stricter. Or I would say more black-and-white. I feel like right now, it’s a pretty gray area and I don’t know how you would change that, but I think it needs to be more absolute.”

“For someone like me, I feel like I’m outside the blue paint a lot. I just nick a goalie and it’s instantly called back. I feel like if you’re in your area, you should be able to have your space.”

“It’s very sensitive nowadays. It’s kind of confusing. Sometimes you can lay on a goalie and it still counts. Next time you nick him and it’s no goal.”

“You can’t even sneeze on a goalie right now.”

Then there was this one: “Goalies are free game.”

### **Miscellaneous**

The proposals went on and on. Here’s an edited list of grievances and suggestions:

“Let’s bring back the two-line-pass (rule). Slow it down a little bit.”

“Get rid of the trapezoid.”

“Maybe let the goalies play the puck more?”

“Allow kicking and head-butting the puck in. You’re going to the gritty area. If you can get a skate on it, that should be a goal. I also think you should be able to ‘head’ the puck in. The Andrew Shaw rule. I don’t know, if you could head the puck in, that’s pretty impressive.”

“You can use your hands on faceoffs.”

“Get rid of puck-over-glass delay of game.”

“Make delay of game more of a judgment call.”

“Reduce the number of TV timeouts per period from three to one.”

“The whole thing where if the puck gets dumped in from outside of the blue, if the goalie covers it, you can’t change. I think it’s kind of stupid.”

“If your helmet gets knocked off, you can keep playing.”

“Make goalie gear bigger again.”

“No offsides.”

“I’ve got a crazy rule that I think they should apply. The red line becomes the new blue line in five-on-five. I would like to see it tried in preseason for a time. You have to enter onside but then the (defensemen) are able to take the puck out to the red line. You get more space for offensive guys. I don’t know, just a thought.”

"I personally don't like when they call diving and a penalty. I think it should be one or the other. If you dive, it shouldn't have been a penalty in the first place. If a guy hooks you and you fall down, well that's hooking."

"Stay on your feet to block shots. For safety, and I think it would create more offense."

"(Extend the trapezoid to defensive players.) I don't think you should be able to control the puck back there in the defensive zone. So many people control their set breakout. I think if I'm a D-man and go back there, it should almost be like — there's a rule in basketball where you can't stand in the paint for too long. It keeps the pace of play higher. More plays are happening. You can get guys caught out there and they're tired. It'll be more goals scored. So I think from an entertainment value, it'll be better."

"I'd make the change on icing. Maybe you could take one guy off the ice for an icing or two guys off. An icing doesn't mean you can't change. That'd be different because maybe you could take one guy off that's really gassed and put a new guy on that's fresh."

"(Penalize reverse hits.) There's times where there's a bit of gray area on it, but there's times where it's blatant interference. And they tend to be right in the head, always high, and as a forechecker, what am I supposed to do? I have to come in hard on you. That's my job. And then you just get dinged in the face. It's a tough spot for the forechecker."

Choice of where faceoffs are taken: "It's actually taking from basketball: If you call timeout, you get to choose where the faceoff is regardless of what happened. Let's say, for instance, two minutes are left in the game, you pull the goalie and you get icing called against you. You call timeout, have your 30 seconds and then the puck goes in the offensive zone. Icing is nullified, and you get to start in the offensive zone. Anything to create offense — because offense is what drives viewership and the excitement in the game — so anything to bring more offense that doesn't wreck the integrity of the game. Just like as a penalty, (the faceoff) starts in the O-zone. You get one timeout a game. You don't get three a half like basketball. You get one so with that one, you get to have one offensive zone start."

"Mandatory that a fourth-line player has to start overtime."

## The Athletic / Canada's 4 Nations roster stock WATCH: Bedard or Scheifele? Pietrangelo or Bouchard?

By Harman Dayal and Chris Johnston – November 22, 2024

We're less than two weeks away from Canada, the United States, Sweden and Finland revealing their full rosters for the 4 Nations Face-Off. The tournament, which will take place between Feb 12-20 in Montreal and Boston, will be a tantalizing appetizer to the NHL's return to the Olympics in 2026.

Each country has already named six players to the roster. For everyone else, time is running out for a final push to make the team.

In today's piece, we're going to focus on Team Canada and examine players whose odds of making the final cut are trending up or down based on the start they've had to their season. We're going to focus on players who we think are on the bubble.

That means, for example, that we won't include Sam Reinhart or Mitch Marner as "risers" despite their torrid starts because they were near-locks to make the team before the season started anyway. Similarly, we're not going to include Zach Hyman as a "faller," for example, because his 54-goal campaign from last year, his chemistry with Connor McDavid and his net-front grit will almost certainly be weighed far more heavily than the slow start he's had to this season. We'd be very surprised if he didn't make the team.

It's extremely important to note that just because a player is a "riser" it doesn't mean that they're necessarily making the team — a couple of the "riser" forwards on our list, for example, will probably be among the final cuts just because of the math — or that the "fallers" are doomed. If a player is on this list, it simply means that their odds of their roster qualification have shifted significantly enough based on their early season performance to warrant discussion and consideration.

Without further ado, let's dive in.

### **Rising**

#### **Mark Scheifele, Winnipeg Jets**

**19 GP, 12G-12A-24PTS, 20:12 ATOI**

As the top scorer and top-line center on the NHL's top team, it's been hard to miss Scheifele this season. His hat-trick performance against the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers on Tuesday night should only underline the kind of form he's in.

The question with Scheifele typically comes down to the perception of his all-around game. It's particularly relevant in a Team Canada setting, where top-six minutes will be tough to come by on a roster that already includes McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Sidney Crosby, Brayden Point and Brad Marchand.

While Scheifele isn't a 200-foot beast, the underlying numbers tell the story of a player who has made positive strides in that area of his game. His 49.27 percent expected goals share indicates Winnipeg isn't struggling to control quality chances when he's on the ice to anywhere near the same degree it once did.

And his elite offensive gifts have been on full display for evaluators this season. Scheifele boasts the fifth-highest point total among Canadian skaters, which may give him a leg up over others on the bubble when the difficult decisions get made.



### **Alex Pietrangelo, Vegas Golden Knights**

**19 GP, 2G-12A-14PTS, 21:55 ATOI**

Pietrangelo had a down season last year as he battled through illness/injury. He slipped to 33 points in 64 games, his mobility looked hindered at times and the Golden Knights were ultimately outshot, outchanced and outscored during his five-on-five minutes.

The 34-year-old all-around defender is enjoying a renaissance start to the 2024-25 campaign. He's piled up 14 points in 19 games, which is a career-high pace. He's also decisively winning his even-strength matchups again, helping Vegas control more than 55 percent of scoring chances during his shifts. Pietrangelo's been a key cog behind the Golden Knights' impressive start, which has them sitting in first place in the Pacific division by points percentage.

Pietrangelo's veteran, big-game experience also gives him a major advantage. He won gold for Team Canada at the 2014 Sochi Olympics and is only two seasons removed from winning the Stanley Cup.

### **Travis Konecny, Philadelphia Flyers**

**20 GP, 11G-12A-23PTS, 21:10 ATOI**

Konecny is on absolute fire, almost singlehandedly carrying a struggling Flyers offense on a nightly basis.

He leads Philadelphia in scoring by a five-goal, eight-point margin, a massive gap considering we're only 20 games into the season. The lack of offensive help around him is crucial context — other candidates may produce similar numbers but are doing so with other elite talent around them whereas Konecny is often a one-man show.

Konecny would also inject some edge and sandpaper with his fiery, energizing playstyle. He's been a key part of the Flyers' top-five-ranked penalty kill too. Don't overlook the value of these stylistic and defensive ingredients because they could translate well to a fourth-line role.

### **Logan Thompson, Washington Capitals**

**8-0-1, .913 save percentage**

Canada's goaltending situation is by far the biggest wild card heading into the tournament. Has Thompson done enough with his stellar start to be one of the three netminders selected?

The 27-year-old became the first goalie in Capitals history to win all of his first seven games with the franchise. He's pitched a solid .913 save percentage and his 6.3 goals saved above expected rating ranks first among Canadian goaltenders this season, according to Evolving-Hockey's model.

While Thompson has never been a true upper-echelon starter (he hasn't been tasked with 50 starts or more in a single season), he owns a .912 career save percentage over 112 career NHL games and his .908 mark from last year is the lowest that his save percentage has ever been in a single season. Those are pretty steady results, even if they're not spectacular.

A lack of big-game experience may be the biggest knock on Thompson. He has less than 10 games of playoff experience at the professional level and doesn't have international reps suiting up for Canada besides the 2022 IIHF World Championship.

### **John Tavares, Toronto Maple Leafs**

**19 GP, 9G-10A-19PTS, 17:32 ATOI**

His evolving role with the Maple Leafs may wind up working in his favor with Team Canada because Tavares has proven he can still be effective even when not deployed as a front-line offensive player.

Tasked with starting more shifts in the defensive zone than at any point previously in his 16-year NHL career, Tavares remains an even-strength play driver who shows determination in puck battles and tremendous finishing ability around the net.

What's more, he probably doesn't get enough credit for the details in his defensive game and he's been among the NHL's most trusted faceoff men for years now. Any anticipated age-related falloff hasn't shown up to a degree that should concern decision-makers, which alone should cause his stock to rise.

There are intangibles to consider, too. Tavares takes particular pride in representing his country and was a standout while wearing the 'C' at the IIHF World Championship earlier this year.

While he may ultimately end up being on the outside looking in, there's a lot working in his favor.

### **Travis Sanheim, Philadelphia Flyers**

**20 GP, 5G-7A-12PTS, 25:33 ATOI**

No Canadian skater has played more NHL minutes than Sanheim this season. In fact, the past two years have seen him turn into an all-situations monster for Philadelphia, which has landed him on the Canadian management team's radar.

Of particular note is his work on the Flyers' penalty kill. That unit is among the league's best and features Sanheim as a lane-disrupting, shot-blocking, minute-munching force.

While those kinds of qualities won't be among those being celebrated ahead of a 4 Nations Face-Off that features the world's most skilled offensive players, they will have utility for a team trying to win the event. They also aren't in ample supply among the other left-shot defensemen vying for a third-pairing role on the team. That group includes Josh Morrissey and Morgan Rielly, who are more offensive-minded in their approach.

You won't find Sanheim's name on too many roster projections floating around in the media, but his odds of making this team are much higher in November than they were in September.

### **Brandon Hagel, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**17 GP, 8G-9A-17PTS, 20:43 ATOI**

Putting together a best-on-best roster isn't just about building a lineup with the most purely skilled and talented players. You need versatile players who can fill different roles, offer a unique skill set and can excel in a limited-minutes role where they aren't given prime offensive opportunities.

Hagel checks many of those boxes. The 26-year-old left winger is a massive pain in the neck to play against because of his speed and tenacity. He's a demon on the forecheck, drives strong two-way results at even-strength and is a penalty-killing ace.

There's no shortage of offensive skill either, as he quietly racked up 75 points last season and is clipping at a point-per-game pace early this year.

Hagel is the sort of player who could thrive in a fourth-line role given his pesky, energetic play style, defensive chops and underrated skill. The competition is going to be fierce for the final forward spots so he may still be on the outside looking in, but he's at least worked his way into the conversation.

### **Tom Wilson, Washington Capitals**

**18 GP, 6G-7A-13PTS, 18:30 ATOI**

The idea of Wilson making Team Canada would have seemed totally far-fetched before this season started. But the Capitals villain got off to an incredibly hot offensive start and his play-driving numbers

are excellent, with Washington controlling 58 percent of expected goals and carrying a 17-10 edge in goals during Wilson's five-on-five minutes.

The big question here: How much stock do you put in Wilson's physicality, meanness and the fear factor he provides? Many fans will roll their eyes at those intangibles and dismiss them as irrelevant. But others still view that as an important part of the game.

It's also worth pointing out that Wilson has slowed down since his sensational first two weeks; he's only scored one goal and six assists in his last 14 games.

## **Falling**

### **Steven Stamkos, Nashville Predators**

**20 GP, 6G-4A-10PTS, 18:21 ATOI**

It was somewhat telling that Stamkos recently said he's found the on-ice transition to Nashville more difficult than the off-ice one after his family's move from Tampa. Some of that may simply be down to the Predators' roster construction. They've moved their new forward pieces around a lot while searching for the proper fit.

As understandable as his slow start may be, it hasn't helped his chances with Team Canada. Stamkos still possesses a lethal shot and can help any power play you put him on, but things have not gone well when he's been on the ice at even strength over the first quarter of the season.

The Predators have been on the wrong end of those minutes when measured by shots, chances or goals.

Ultimately, Stamkos faces the same challenge as a number of offensive-minded Canadian forwards. With so many of the team's prime roster spots already spoken for, does he bring enough other elements around the fringes to garner an invite?

### **Stuart Skinner, Edmonton Oilers**

**6-5-2, .881 save percentage**

Canada's goaltending competition was wide open to begin the season and Skinner looked well-positioned to factor into the final picture after helping the Oilers reach Game 7 of the Stanley Cup in the spring.

It's been a struggle since. Playing behind an Oilers blue line in need of an upgrade and a team that's had too many inconsistent performances for any coach's liking, Skinner sits 73rd in goals saved above expected. Put another way: He's allowed nine goals more than the quality of chances suggest he should have in 13 appearances.

While only a small handful of his peers have blown the doors off and forced their way into the Team Canada conversation, three other goalies hovering around or just below a .900 save percentage boast more overall experience and own a Stanley Cup ring: Darcy Kuemper, Jordan Binnington and Adin Hill.

### **Mathew Barzal, New York Islanders**

**10 GP, 2G-3A-5PTS, 21:12 ATOI**

Barzal hasn't even resumed skating since being knocked out of the Islanders lineup with what the team labeled an upper-body injury. And he's not expected to return to game action until some time after Team Canada is already selected.

When you couple that health situation with a sluggish October, it's hard to see a path to the national team's roster for the ultra-talented forward. Barzal was already in a position where he had to blow the doors off in the first couple of months to fight his way onto this roster.

#### **Evan Bouchard, Edmonton Oilers**

**20 GP, 5G-8A-13PTS, 24:09 ATOI**

Bouchard is one of the most gifted defensemen in the league. He still has a decent chance of cracking the Canadian roster, but after a slow start to this season, he's not quite the shoo-in he perhaps looked like after his dominant playoff run last spring.

The falling point totals are one thing, but the bigger question mark is his defensive play. Bouchard's defensive metrics have never been an issue, but by the eye test, he's been prone to egregious mistakes and lackadaisical breakdowns.

With Cale Makar likely running Canada's top power-play unit and no shortage of PP2 quarterback options like Josh Morrissey, who's leading the Jets' NHL-best man advantage, Bouchard's power-play and offensive gifts won't be enough on their own to make him a lock for the roster. The decision-makers will need to feel confident that he can also hold his own defensively, which is up for debate.

#### **Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks**

**19 GP, 3G-12A-15PTS, 19:29 ATOI**

Bedard is a future Team Canada lock and will likely play a key role for his country in the 2026 Olympics. Given how important his development will be for the national team program's future, the decision-makers could view the 4 Nations tournament as an important opportunity for him to get a glimpse of the big stage, even if it's as a 13th forward.

With that said, the 19-year-old phenom hasn't yet had the big sophomore breakout many people were anticipating. Bedard's five-on-five underlying metrics, especially on the defensive side, are significantly better than last year but he's notched just three goals in 19 games this season. He isn't producing enough to warrant a spot in Canada's top six and his game may not be viewed as the best stylistic fit for a bottom-six role.

#### **Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Edmonton Oilers**

**20 GP, 2G-7A-9PTS, 19:28 ATOI**

In 2022-23, Nugent-Hopkins racked up 104 points. Given that elite production, his familiarity with McDavid, two-way reliability and experience as a complementary winger next to superstar talent, he could have been in contention for one of the final forward spots.

Nugent-Hopkins, unfortunately, saw his production crater to 67 points last season and has mustered just two goals and nine points this season. He needed a monster start to become a dark horse option to crack the team but has instead delivered the exact opposite.

## ESPN / Grading preseason bold predictions for all 32 NHL teams

By Greg Wyshynski – November 22, 2024

### Reactions

Before the 2024-25 NHL season, we made bold predictions for all 32 teams, ranging from individual player achievement to where teams would end up in the standings.

With almost a quarter of the season in the books, some of these predictions have already come true ... while others are teetering on the brink of being absolutely egregious.

Here's a progress report on our bold predictions. We'll rate each prediction on a 1-10 scale, with "1" indicating that the prediction absolutely will not come true and "10" indicating that I absolutely nailed it. Enjoy!

### Atlantic Division

#### Boston Bruins

This will be Jim Montgomery's last season in Boston

Montgomery didn't have a contract beyond this season, despite GM Don Sweeney's claim that the two sides were talking extension. Sweeney said on Wednesday that it was a matter of financial disagreement, but also added several times that a performance factored into the talks.

I thought it was fairly obvious that if the Bruins didn't meet expectations of management, Monty would meet the same fate as the other Jack Adams winners (Claude Julien, Bruce Cassidy) that were dismissed by the Cam Neely regime. What I didn't anticipate was the dismissal happening after just 20 games. Montgomery was fired on Tuesday and replaced by associate coach Joe Sacco after Boston's 8-9-3 start (.475 points percentage).

Boston was 31st in team offense (2.40 goals per game) and 28th in defense (3.45 goals against per game), the latter being a product of their suddenly porous goaltending. Montgomery wasn't the reason Jeremy Swayman had an .884 save percentage through 14 games or that Boston decided to break up the best goalie tandem in the NHL by trading Linus Ullmark to Ottawa. This disappointing season is a matter of construction over coaching ... but there's no denying that Montgomery's heralded defensive system was less effective ever since Patrice Bergeron called it a career.

Montgomery did what he could to light a fire under the Bruins, including when he benched David Pastrnak recently. Now it's Sweeney trying to light a fire under the Bruins by sending Montgomery packing.

Nailed this one. Wish they could have all been this easy ...

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 10**

#### Buffalo Sabres

##### The playoff drought ends

I'm not the first person nor the last person to get burned for naïve optimism about the Sabres returning to the playoffs for the first time since 2011.

They rehired the coach from the last playoff qualifier, Lindy Ruff, to figure out what to do with a young collection of promising players. I figured he'd get them to play better defensively, and he has: The

Sabres are sixth in expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 (2.29), an improvement from last season. I thought that the Sabres could be like Ruff's teams in New Jersey and score their way out of problems. They're 11th in goals per game (3.33). All of this is promising.

But I also wrote this: "While Ruff doesn't have Dominik Hasek or Ryan Miller between the pipes, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was strong last season and Devon Levi's underlying numbers showed promise."

UPL has been slightly above expected (.903 save percentage). Levi has been a not-ready-for-prime-time disaster: 2-5-0 and a minus-7.5 goals saved above expected before he was demoted to the AHL.

But I'm keeping the faith here, given how the Eastern Conference has shaken out. Money Puck gives the Sabres a 17.3% chance of making the playoffs, and it would likely have to be in that last wild-card spot. They're within striking distance. If they can avoid the two steps forward/two steps back dance, they still have a shot at breaking the drought.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 5**

### **Detroit Red Wings**

#### **Hitting reverse in Motor City**

If the Red Wings were going to finally make the leap from the Atlantic Division also-rans to make the playoffs for the first time under general manager Steve Yzerman, they needed to improve defensively. Alas, they're giving up about as much (3.33) as the analytics tell us they should (3.2 expected goals against per 60 minutes in all strengths). Having the league's worst penalty kill doesn't help.

To Yzerman's credit, goalie Cam Talbot was a strong offseason addition (7.2 goals saved above expected) and easily the best goalie on the roster.

It was entirely predictable that the Red Wings' shooting percentage would come down from last season, but their offense has really taken a tumble from 3.35 goals per game last season to 2.56 in 18 games this season.

I said the Red Wings would take a step back and that they have: From a .555 points percentage last season to .444 this season. It's getting to the point where Yzerman needs to do something to improve this group -- perhaps it ends up being a change behind the bench.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 9**

### **Florida Panthers**

#### **Regression, thy name is Sam Reinhart**

I assumed Reinhart was singing for his supper in a contract year when he scored 57 goals in 82 games last season, en route to winning the Stanley Cup. He signed an eight-year, \$69 million extension to remain with the Panthers ... and immediately started playing like he was paid by the goal. His 14 goals left him one off of Alex Ovechkin's league lead through 19 games.

Reinhart's 5-on-5 goals per 60 minutes this season (1.36) is currently outpacing his average from last season (1.13) when, again, he scored 57 goals. It's been a while since I took a statistics class, but I don't believe that's regression.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 1**

### **Montreal Canadiens**

#### **Lane Hutson will be a Calder Trophy finalist**

In the first NHL Awards Watch of the season, where we survey actual awards voters for their current picks, Hutson was in the top three for the Calder.

His 11 points in 19 games leads all rookie defensemen, although that's not really a feat given this season's crop of rookie blueliners. Through 19 games, he was third among all rookies in scoring.

Hutson has been "as advertised" for the Habs: Highlight-reel offense and skating, a minus-9 on a defensively challenged team. He's getting good ice time (23:00 per game) and appears to be improving as the season goes on.

The Calder has about five players in the mix as of now: Hutson, the Flyers' Matvei Michkov, the Stars' Logan Stankoven, first overall pick Macklin Celebrini of the Sharks and Flames goalie Dustin Wolf. Hutson has as strong a case as any of them.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 8**

### **Ottawa Senators**

#### **Linus Ullmark will be one-and-done**

When Ullmark was acquired from the Bruins during the offseason, there was some speculation that he might turn around and leave the Senators after the last year of his contract -- a one-and-done pickup like Alex DeBrincat was for Ottawa.

Instead, Ullmark committed to the Sens with a four-year, \$33 million contract extension he signed in October. The contract runs through 2028-29 and carries a full no-movement clause.

Now, the only caveat I'd add here is that Ullmark hasn't been all that good for the Senators. Surely they won't decide he's one-and-done, would they?

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 2**

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

#### **Jake Guentzel scores 40 goals, at a minimum**

When the Lightning decided to let Steven Stamkos walk to free agency, they reallocated his cap space to Jake Guentzel, who was four years his junior. They also gave Guentzel their former captain's spot in the lineup on the wing of Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov. Which is indeed a good place to be for a scoring winger.

Guentzel has hit 40 goals twice in his career, both skating with Sidney Crosby in Pittsburgh. He has seven goals in his first 17 games this season for the Lightning, trailing both of his talented linemates. That projects to be around only 33 goals on the season for him. But given the fireworks factory that is Tampa Bay's top line, I still have hope.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 6**

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

#### **Mitch Marner re-signs with the Leafs**

Marner had quite the offseason. That's where speculation about trade destinations gave way to stories about how Marner was willing to sign an extension during the season to avoid unrestricted free agency next summer. Because he and new coach Craig Berube had coffee together.

Marner leads the Maple Leafs with 24 points in 19 games -- an especially important start given that Auston Matthews has been out of the lineup. He's playing his usual 200-foot game with steadily impressive offensive numbers.

There's no telling what ultimately happens with Marner, because there's no telling what ultimately happens with the Leafs this season. Does he become a "sacrificial" player for an underperforming team? Does Toronto get closer to a championship, making him indispensable?

One thing's clear: There's been much more discussion about Marner's future in Toronto than the trade market for him.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 8**

### **Metropolitan Division**

#### **Carolina Hurricanes**

##### **Canes will miss the playoff cut**

As of this writing, the Hurricanes have the best points percentage in the Eastern Conference after a 13-4-0 start to the season. They have not been impacted by a defection of talent, they have a plus-27 goal differential and might have their first legit Hart Trophy candidate since Eric Staal in Martin Necas, who had 30 points in his first 17 games.

After those 17 games, the Hurricanes have a 97.2% chance of making the Stanley Cup playoffs, according to Money Puck. Based on those percentages ...

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 0.28**

#### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

##### **Adam Fantilli has his breakout year**

Given all the emotions that enveloped this organization after the death of star winger Johnny Gaudreau, new head coach Dean Evason has the Blue Jackets playing some really competitive hockey. They had a 7-9-2 record through 18 games, and just a minus-2 in goal differential, despite goaltending that ranked 28th in the NHL. Players like Kirill Marchenko and Yegor Chinakhov are on track for career highs in points. Adam Fantilli is not.

Fantilli has nine points through 18 games (three goals, six assists). His points per 60 minutes is down, which is a symptom of his goal-scoring pace being down -- his shooting percentage has tumbled from 10.4% to 7.3%. His ice time has fluctuated during the season but is up (16:52) over his rookie campaign (15:43).

Fantilli didn't really hit his stride offensively last season until December, when he played to nearly a point-per-game pace. (It fell off in January before a skate laceration ended his season.) His shooting percentage should improve, which could lead to an uptick in production if Fantilli can increase his shot output. But I'm not exactly confident that it'll all add up to a "breakout" season.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 4**

#### **New Jersey Devils**

##### **Devils will win the Eastern Conference**

There are nights when this bold prediction seems very smart and there are nights when it feels very stupid. I'd say I've experienced the former more than the latter overall.



The Devils have a .619 points percentage after 21 games, which ranks them sixth in the Eastern Conference. They're in the top 10 in goals for and against per game, although their 5-on-5 numbers are a tick below what the analytics expect.

With 10 goals and 10 assists, Nico Hischier is having the kind of season that could win him the Selke Trophy. (No, offense shouldn't dictate who wins a defensive forward award, but let's not be naïve about how it ends up working.) Jack Hughes and Jesper Bratt are both playing to better than a point-per-game pace, while Stefan Noesen and Paul Cotter look like two of the best offseason acquisitions for anyone.

So a lot has gone right for the Devils, except the thing they need to go the most right: Their revamped goaltending. Jacob Markstrom has played to minus-1.3 goals saved above expected, and is in the negative for wins above replacement. Jake Allen has been the better goalie, but he's not the guy tasked with being New Jersey's high-profile savior in goal.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 7**

### **New York Islanders**

#### **Mathew Barzal will set a new career scoring mark**

I made this prediction because I was really excited to see how the line of Barzal, Bo Horvat and Anthony Duclair clicked as a trio. And they cooked together: 68.1% goals-for percentage at 5-on-5.

The problem is that "cooking" was about as long as it takes to make microwave popcorn. They played less than 60 minutes total together. Duclair was injured on Oct. 19 and hasn't played since. Then Barzal was injured on Oct. 30 and hasn't returned to the lineup.

Barzal had five points in 10 games before his injury. His 85-point career high from 2017-18 is probably not getting eclipsed given the time he lost. However, the beauty of this prediction is in its vagueness: If he comes roaring back to beat his career high of 1.04 points per game, I think that qualifies.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 5**

### **New York Rangers**

#### **Rangers, Shesterkin get new deal done**

Through 17 games, the Rangers' star goaltender has a .911 save percentage in going 8-4-1. He also doesn't have a contract beyond this season, as the sides couldn't come to an agreement before the season.

My colleague Emily Kaplan reports that Shesterkin's camp thinks he's "the team's most important player, so he should be the top-paid player on the team. Currently, that's winger Artemi Panarin at \$11.64 million." That squares with reports that Shesty could be seeking upwards of \$12 million in average annual value in his next contract.

So one can understand why a deal hasn't gotten done quite yet, given that gap between the ask and what the Rangers hope the contract looks like.

I think that Shesterkin knows whatever team could offer him that scratch on the UFA market isn't going to have, like, Adam Fox on their blue line next decade. Which is to say that he'd probably be better off with the Rangers than taking Philadelphia or Utah's money. Both sides want to get this done. They'll figure it out.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 9**

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

### **Jamie Drysdale stays healthy, breaks out**

My hopes were high for Drysdale, as he came into Flyers camp in great shape and looked like he was going to see time alongside defensive defenseman Nick Seeler, who was a great complement to Sean Walker last season.

They are not very high anymore, alas. Drysdale has three points (one goal, two assists) in 15 games, and has already been out of the lineup with an injury. Five years into his NHL career, it has unfortunately been more of the same for the sixth overall pick in the 2020 draft.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 1**

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

#### **The power play finishes top 10**

It's been a disastrous season for the Penguins in just about every way, as their 7-10-4 start has them ahead of only the Montreal Canadiens in Eastern Conference points percentage through 21 games. The future of coach Mike Sullivan is a daily conversation, as is speculation about whether Sidney Crosby wants to suffer through being on a lottery team.

Found within the smoldering wreckage of this Penguins season are special teams units that actually aren't that bad. Pittsburgh's penalty kill ranked ninth through 21 games (82.5%). Their power play is in the top half of the league (14th, 19.6%) with room for improvement. It's markedly better than the 15.3% conversation rate they posted last season, which ranked 30th.

So new assistant coach David Quinn has made a positive difference with the man advantage, for a unit that has at least three players with Hall of Fame credentials in Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Erik Karlsson. Add in Bryan Rust, Kris Letang and Rickard Rakell, and there's enough talent here to get this group to 24% efficiency, which would be top 10. Although the seemingly inevitable fire sale from this roster could impact that.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 7**

### **Washington Capitals**

#### **Alex Ovechkin passes Wayne Gretzky**

It was extraordinary to watch Alex Ovechkin stack goal on goal to start this season at 39 years old. He came into camp in excellent shape, was determined to prove doubters wrong after a disappointing postseason and had the carrot of the Wayne Gretzky's career goals record of 894.

But this wasn't "the old guy has still got it!" With 15 goals through 18 games, this was the hottest start Ovechkin has ever had. Not at 22. Not at 32. At 39 years old. That's beyond extraordinary.

Unfortunately, the Gretzky chase took a detour this week when Ovechkin injured his leg against Utah and is week-to-week for the Capitals. He's 27 goals away from passing The Great One. Teammate Tom Wilson said Ovechkin will be "back stronger than ever" when he returns from injury.

Based on the start, I was at a "10" he'd break it. The injury gives me some pause.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: (Great) 8**

### **Central Division**

#### **Chicago Blackhawks**

##### **Seth Jones is traded**

Jones is going to miss about a month with a foot injury, which will obviously hurt his audition for other teams. Assuming he'll be traded, which remains just an assumption at this point.

Jones had 10 points in 17 games for the Blackhawks, earning half of those while quarterbacking their power play. He's first in the NHL in average ice time (25:43), one of the trademark aspects of the defenseman's game for years.

The logic behind this prediction was that a rising salary cap would make Jones's \$9.5 million AAV on his contract (which run through 2029-30) more palatable to another team. If he showed an uptick in play -- or if another general manager felt his underwhelming numbers in Chicago were due to the Blackhawks being terrible rather than a deficiency with Jones -- perhaps there would be interest.

Again, I don't know anything concrete here, despite some digital hockey media sites treating as news my pondering of Edmonton GM Stan Bowman going after the player he signed in Chicago. But I do know top-pairing defensemen are hard to come by. And I know the Blackhawks remain a team with about a dozen holes to fill.

Perhaps GM Kyle Davidson sees Jones as part of the long-term plan for Connor Bedard & Co., despite not having traded for him or signed him. Or perhaps, if the conditions are right, he moves him to a contender.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 4**

### **Colorado Avalanche**

#### **Gabriel Landeskog wins the Masterton Trophy**

Landeskog finally returned to the ice in an NHL arena this month ... to present former teammate Erik Johnson of the Flyers with a framed portrait to celebrate the defenseman's 1,000th game.

OK, not the return we were hoping to see. It also came a few weeks after Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said Landeskog suffered a setback in his training, as the captain tries to return from knee surgery followed by cartilage transplant surgery that has kept him out of the Colorado lineup for two seasons. The Avalanche have kept hope alive that Landeskog can return, but there's no timetable for that comeback.

The Masterton Trophy is handed out to the player who "best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication." Landeskog hasn't played since June 26, 2022. If his long journey back ends with him even playing one game for the Avalanche this season, that might be enough to earn him the award. If he plays, which remains a longshot at this point.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 6**

### **Dallas Stars**

#### **Stars win the Western Conference**

It's hard to really focus on any other contender in the Western Conference when you have the Jets steamrolling the league at the top of the standings and the Oilers struggling to find their footing as they shake off a Stanley Cup Final hangover.

Lingering between those extremes are the Stars, who have lost in the conference finals in consecutive seasons. They're right near the top of the league in goals-against average, with Jake Oettinger making his case for Team USA goalie (plus-6.5 goals saved above expected). Casey DeSmith was an upgrade as his backup as well.

But the offense has some trouble spots. It turns out replacing Joe Pavelski on the team's top line isn't that simple, as the revamped unit with Wyatt Johnston joining Jason Robertson and Roope Hintz was a defensive sieve. Coach Peter DeBoer has tried those three in different combos around the lineup, trying to find something that clicks. Robertson has four goals in 17 games; Johnston, one of the best young goal-scorers in the league, has two goals in 17 games.

The news is better with Matt Duchene, who scored 10 goals and is playing above a point-per-game pace; and Logan Stankoven, who is the leader for the Calder Trophy early in the season.

There's still plenty of time for the Stars to find their groove offensively, and for GM Jim Nill to make his customary augmentations to a roster that has Stanley Cup championship potential with its balance between young stars and established veterans.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 7**

### **Minnesota Wild**

#### **Jesper Wallstedt takes Filip Gustavsson's job**

With Marc-Andre Fleury hanging up his mask after this season, the Wild's talented top goalie prospect Jesper Wallstedt is expected to ascend to their NHL tandem. I figured that might happen in 2024-25 thanks to Filip Gustavsson. But through 14 games, that was a very misguided notion.

Gustavsson has backstopped the Wild to a 9-3-2 record, and a stellar .926 save percentage and league-best 2.07 goals-against average. He has 7.1 goals saved above expected, per Money Puck. The Wild reportedly shopped him during the offseason after a middling 2023-24 (.899 save percentage) but nothing materialized. Talk about your happy accidents.

There's still a chance the Wild move Gustavsson before his limited trad protection kicks in next summer, but that's an offseason move because Minnesota is a contender in the West. If Wallstedt takes anyone's game, it might be Fleury as he tapers down later in the season. But he's not catching the Gus bus through the first quarter of the season.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 1**

### **Nashville Predators**

#### **Roman Josi wins the Norris Trophy**

This prediction was based on how good the Predators were projected to be this season after their blockbuster summer of veteran additions like Steven Stamkos. That should tell you all you need to know about the quality of this prediction 19 games into the season.

The Predators are one of the NHL's biggest disappointments, sitting at 31st in the league in points percentage, one Chicago Blackhawks away from the basement. They've had three separate losing streaks of three or more games. They've been messier than Broadway at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

Alas, Josi has not been immune to this catastrophe. He has 14 points in 19 games, which is quite good for most defensemen but way off the mark from his previous three seasons. He's also a minus-12, which would be the worst rating of his career if it holds. There have been only three defensemen in the last 30 years to win the Norris with a negative plus/minus: Rob Blake in 1997-98 (-3), Nicklas Lidstrom in 2010-11 (-2) and Erik Karlsson in 2022-23, who convinced voters to look away from his minus-26 by scoring 101 points.

Here's the thing about Nashville: It's hard to count out a team that put together a streak of 16 wins in 18 games last season. Josi was well over a point-per-game during that stretch. So it's possible last season's

Norris runner-up can turn his season around. But it's hard to imagine it would be a sharp enough turn to overcome the season Cale Makar is having (27 points in 19 games) in his pursuit of a second Norris win.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 2**

### **St. Louis Blues**

#### **Doug Armstrong wins both offer sheet signings**

GM Doug Armstrong sent shockwaves through the NHL when he signed Edmonton forward Dylan Holloway and defenseman Philip Broberg to offer sheets in the offseason. We had seen only two teams dabble in the dark arts of restricted free agent thievery in the previous decade: The Canadiens and Hurricanes, during the "I'm taking your Jesperi Kotkaniemi because you tried to take my Sebastian Aho" kerfuffle.

The early returns are great for the Blues. Broberg has nine points through 12 games, which is already a career high for the defensive defenseman despite missing time with a leg injury. He's skating 19:34 per game and the Blues are giving up 0.9 goals per 60 minutes when he's on the ice.

Holloway has had quite a noteworthy first 20 games with the Blues. He was stretchered off the bench after taking a puck to the neck against Tampa Bay in early November but didn't miss a game. Holloway has eight points in 20 games, one point away from matching his career best with the Oilers.

Perhaps the biggest win here for St. Louis is how much the Oilers miss these guys within context. Part of Edmonton's slow start has been a lack of effective performances from their depth players. Broberg and Holloway could have certainly helped to that end.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 9**

### **Utah Hockey Club**

#### **We'll just start calling them 'The Yetis'**

It's been fun to see how the sports media has handled the shorthand for the Utah Hockey Club. Do the score bugs on the screen go with UHC or UTA or UTAH? I've heard play-by-play announcers, desperately trying to find another form of reference beyond "Utah," refer to this team as "The Hockey Club" during action.

All of this is to say that the sooner we get to a nickname for UHC, the better, whether it's Yeti or Yetis or something else (but probably Yetis). If nothing else, perhaps it'll provided a momentary distraction from how Utah's blazing start evaporated into a sub-.500 team thanks to injuries on their defense and an unfortunate dud of a season from the usually dependable Connor Ingram in goal.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 8**

### **Winnipeg Jets**

#### **Connor Hellebuyck leads USA to 4 Nations Face-Off win**

When you ask the Jets about the secrets to their historic early-season success, the conversation eventually leads back to the crease. Connor Hellebuyck won the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's best goaltender last season. His numbers so far during the Jets' 16-3-0 start have been stellar, too. It's not as if he's stealing games, but he's providing the foundation for the Jets to soar.

"Everybody knows if you don't have goaltending, it makes for a long year. So Helly gives us that foundation," coach Scott Arniel said. "But the biggest thing too is that we're not just sitting and waiting

on him to make 50 saves for us. We know there's going to be breakdowns, where he's going to have to stand up and make the save for us."

Which he does more often than not.

Goaltending shouldn't be the problem for Team USA at the 4 Nations Face-Off in February. Even with Jeremy Swayman struggling and Thatcher Demko working back from an injury, the Americans still have Hellebuyck and Jake Oettinger, with emerging options like Dustin Wolf, Anthony Stolarz and Joey Daccord in the bullpen.

But it should be Hellebuyck that gets the crease for the big games, like the one against Canada and then potentially a gold medal rematch. Rosters come out on Dec. 4. The U.S. will have their chance at international (midseason exhibition tournament that's limited to four countries due to the Russia issue) hockey glory.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 9**

### **Pacific Division**

#### **Anaheim Ducks**

##### **Cam Fowler will be traded now, Trevor Zegras later**

A three-game winning streak has pushed the Ducks to .500 on the season through 20 games. They've been fun, in the sense that watching Leo Carlsson blossom into a young star (six goals in 18 games) is fun.

They're also fun because the Ducks are worst in expected goals against (3.47), shots against (34.74) and high-danger shot attempts against (14.82) per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, yet they're 14th in the NHL in goals-against average (3.00). That's thanks to Lukas Dostal (.924 save percentage), who is second in the NHL in goals saved above expected (9.2), according to StatHletes.

With two assists in 12 games, Fowler hasn't been all that fun. He's currently out two to four weeks with an upper-body injury as well. Fowler, 32, has two seasons left on his contract before unrestricted free agency. He makes \$6.5 million against the salary cap and has limited trade protection. His value isn't exactly high at the moment, but perhaps the Ducks can find a taker with some retained salary to open playing time for a younger defenseman.

Zegras, meanwhile, continues to languish under Ducks head coach Greg Cronin. He has two goals in 18 games, to go along with four assists. That was after 15 points in 31 games last season, which was interrupted by a broken ankle. Trade rumors swirled around him last summer. The guess here is that he's moved in the offseason, with one year left before restricted free agency.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 6**

Watching Dustin Wolf excitedly celebrate a shootout win over the Islanders this week cliched it for me: The Calgary team is going to be pesky all season, will finish three to five points out of a playoff spot and have GM Craig Conroy crowing about a retool when this franchise needs a rebuild.

Again, that's tough when the goaltending isn't terrible, and both Wolf and Dan Vladar have been better than average. In Wolf's case, he might be playing himself into the rookie of year conversation. We had this tandem 29th in our preseason rankings, but with one goalie expert's caveat: "They have a tandem that could make this ranking look very silly."

If Wolf keeps playing like this and the Flames score a bit more -- being better than 15% on the power play would help to that end -- then the tank is empty. Again, probably not for the betterment of the

franchise in the long term, but Conroy got what he wanted. (Also, please check out this story for the convoluted scenarios surrounding Calgary's first-round picks.)

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 10**

### **Edmonton Oilers**

#### **Evander Kane will get the LTIR special**

Kane underwent abdominal surgery basically on the eve of the regular season, with the Oilers saying that "recovery from the procedure is expected to take a minimum of five to six months." His \$5.125 million cap hit is currently on long-term injured reserve, giving the Oilers just over \$4.3 million in current cap space.

Kevin Weekes has reported that Kane could return to the Oilers "in early 2025," and given the team's middling start they could probably use his offensive pop back in the lineup. That said, the original prognosis would have had him back in March, roughly one month before the Stanley Cup playoffs begin. Until the CBA is amended, teams are allowed to have a player on long-term injured reserve for Game 82 of the regular season and then in their lineup for Game 1 of the playoffs.

Obviously, we don't believe any NHL GM would traffic in such salary cap shenanigans ... especially one in Stan Bowman, who was one of the first to use the CBA loophole nine years ago when Patrick Kane went from LTIR to playoff-ready for the Blackhawks.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 7**

### **Los Angeles Kings**

#### **Quinton Byfield will break 70 points**

Byfield entered the season with a bunch of expectations placed on him, not only due to his 20-goal, 55-point breakout season in 2023-24, but because of the five-year, \$31.25 million contract extension bestowed upon him by the team.

Byfield started the season in the middle of Kevin Fiala and Warren Foegele, played up with Anze Kopitar as he did last season, and then skated with Foegele and Alex Laferrriere. But the talented Kings forward just hasn't gotten going, with two goals and seven assists through 19 games.

Obviously this is anything but a 70-point pace for Byfield. He's pressing too hard to make plays and only has one multi-point game this season. He's 22 years old. It happens. You live and learn.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 2**

### **San Jose Sharks**

#### **Macklin Celebrini will win the Calder**

As mentioned earlier, the first ESPN NHL Awards Watch clearly indicated support from the voters for Sharks rookie star Macklin Celebrini, who had already lit up the highlight reel a couple of times this season. The problem was that an early-season injury had limited him to just eight games as of Wednesday, while some of his rookie peers had seen more action. Logan Stankoven, the early leader for the Calder, had 14 points in 17 games, for example.

It's not automatic that the first overall pick in the prior NHL draft wins rookie of the year, although it might feel that way given the last 20 years, when Alex Ovechkin, Patrick Kane, Nathan MacKinnon, Aaron Ekblad, Auston Matthews and most recently Connor Bedard all took home the Calder. Overall, it's happened only 12 times since 1963.

Celebrini's five points have come in three games, including an overtime winner against the Red Wings this week. If he improves on that cadence, he could be the NHL's top rookie forward. But he has to stay in the lineup. Points-per-game arguments aren't always winners in the Calder race. As Connor McDavid learned in 2016.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 7**

### **Seattle Kraken**

#### **Shane Wright will quiet the critics**

Before the season, we said Wright didn't need a "breakout season." He just needed to show progress. Some level of proof of concept that the fourth overall pick from 2022 was transforming into an NHL player.

Alas, the critics will be anything but quieted if this season continues the way it's going for Wright. The 20-year-old had a goal and an assist in his first 18 games for the Kraken, with his ice time dropping to 12:25 on average. Dan Bylsma made him a healthy scratch in consecutive games -- and that's a coach that saw him amass 47 points in 57 games in the AHL last season.

Wait 'til next year?

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 1**

### **Vancouver Canucks**

#### **Elias Pettersson will bounce back big**

Few bold predictions have shifted so dramatically in the last couple of weeks. Pettersson had four points in his first 10 games of the season, creating a cottage industry of hand-wringing in the Vancouver media about his performance. Then Petey tallied nine points in eight games, including five goals, to calm everyone down.

His 13 points in 18 games still isn't up to the level of that 102-point season that we hoped he'd approach from a production standpoint. But he's just started heating up, and at the right time for the shorthanded Canucks.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 5**

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

#### **Golden Knights win a playoff round**

Obviously we can't grade this one out until the postseason, but the Golden Knights have already shown this bar is clearable for them.

The Golden Knights were first in the Pacific Division after 18 games, with a plus-15 goal differential. They've been outscoring their problems: 4.00 goals per game vs. 3.17 goals-against per game. Before Mark Stone went out with an injury, his line with Jack Eichel and Ivan Barbashev was cooking, to the level of 5.67 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. Eichel leads the team with 28 points in 18 games. Pavel Dorofeyev led the team with nine goals in a breakout season. He was second in individual expected goals on the Knights at 5-on-5 last season.

The goaltending needs to improve, as Adin Hill and Ilya Samsonov have played to below expected levels. But the defense in front of them is what really needs to improve, as it's currently 29th in expected goals against.



They've got time to sort that out. But as it stands, they look like a playoff team with enough pop to win at least a round.

**Bold prediction confidence rating: 7**

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Quarter-mark check in](#)

By Ryan Dixon – November 22, 2024

About two-thirds of the way through a 15-game slate on Saturday, we will hit the quarter-mark of the 2024-25 season. And, with that, we've basically crammed all the math we're capable of into one sentence.

Nobody can claim the first 25 per cent of the campaign has been uneventful. Connor McDavid got hurt, then came back to record his 1,000th career NHL point in the fourth-fewest games of anybody in league history. Alex Ovechkin did the reverse, signalling he was going to take down Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals mark this season thanks to a scorching start, then got injured on Monday near the end of a game where he netted his league-leading 15th tally.

We've seen the Winnipeg Jets set a new out-of-the-gate standard for excellence by winning 14 of their first 15 contests; a trade of at least some consequence — with the promise of more to come in Pittsburgh — as the Pens shipped Lars Eller to the Caps and, unfortunately, we've also witnessed the first fired coach, as Jim Montgomery got the boot from the Boston Bruins 16 months after winning coach-of-the-year honours in 2023.

It's almost hard to believe three-quarters of the track remains.

While things have obviously been calmer in some burghs than others, there's more than enough season under the bridge to use this week's power rankings as a way to elevate the key event, storyline or performance of the first quarter for all 32 clubs.

- 1. Winnipeg Jets (16-3-0)** Even if you thought the Jets were a Central Division contender — and many of us saw them more as being in a battle for the final two or three playoff slots after an underwhelming off-season — nobody could have predicted a sweet 16 victories in 19 outings. How about the twin 12-12-24 statlines produced by Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor? Incredible stuff in Manitoba.
- 2. Carolina Hurricanes (14-4-0)** Martin Necas has become an offensive force. He's third in league scoring (30 points) behind only Nathan MacKinnon (34) and Kiril Kaprizov (33).
- 3. Washington Capitals (13-4-1)** The Ovi injury is a true gut-punch, but it shouldn't overshadow what this team has achieved to start the year. Washington was, at best, seen as a team that would scrap it out to claim a wild-card berth and the Caps — with huge steps taken by the likes of Dylan Strome and Connor McMichael — have been one of the best teams in the NHL so far and have both the wins and underlying numbers to back that status up.
- 4. New York Rangers (12-4-1)** Will Cuyllé continues to be a wonderful surprise on the Rangers' third line. The 22-year-old sophomore is on pace for 68 points after registering 21 as a rookie. Even if he winds up being a 20-goal, 50-point guy, that's enormous production from a winger who comes in a six-foot-three, 211-pound package.
- 5. Minnesota Wild (12-3-3)** Kirill Kaprizov is an established scoring star in this league, but this year he's out gunning for the Art Ross. Also, Minnesota was looking for ways to unload Filip Gustavsson in the summer. Today, he's got the second-best save percentage (.926) of any goalie who has played 10 games this season.
- 6. Florida Panthers (12-6-1)** It was easy to think Sam Reinhart's 57-goal showing last year — a new personal best by 24 goals — was a one-off explosion. Well, he's right back in the Rocket Richard race with 14 this year, putting him on pace for 60 goals.

- 7. Toronto Maple Leafs (12-6-2)** After Joseph Woll's whitewash in a 3-0 win over Vegas Wednesday night, the Leafs have the fourth-best team save percentage in the league at .913. Much of that is driven by Anthony Stolarz's NHL-best .927 mark.
- 8. Dallas Stars (12-6-0)** For the second straight year, Jason Robertson is struggling to find the net out of the gate. Even with a tally Wednesday night, he's got just five on the season and is on pace for just 50 points.
- 9. New Jersey Devils (12-7-2)** Jacob Markstrom, first seven games with Jersey: 3-3-1, .891 save percentage. Jacob Markstrom, past seven games with Jersey: 5-2-0, .924 SP. Couple that with Jake Allen's strong play and the new goalie battery is starting to take form.
- 10. Tampa Bay Lightning (10-6-1)** Anthony Cirelli looks like he's making an offensive leap as a 27-year-old 2C. He's got 17 points in 17 contests and has found the back of the net in three straight outings.
- 11. Vegas Golden Knights (11-6-2)** Ten years after being drafted No. 2 overall behind Connor McDavid, Jack Eichel — after all kinds of injury troubles — is having the elite No. 1 centre season many believed was always in him. The 28-year-old is on pace for 121 points.
- 12. Calgary Flames (10-6-3)** It's an enormous surprise to see Calgary in a playoff sport through a quarter of the season and, increasingly, the driving force behind the Flames' success is the Calder-worthy play of goalie Dustin Wolf.
- 13. Edmonton Oilers (10-8-2)** It's obviously not the same as the 5-12-1 debacle that cost Jay Woodcroft his coaching job last year, but Edmonton's underwhelming start to this year is still cause for concern.
- 14. Los Angeles Kings (10-7-3)** We all thought this was the year Quinton Byfield would wreak havoc on the league, but he's stuck on two goals in 20 games.
- 15. Vancouver Canucks (9-6-3)** With J.T. Miller now on leave from the squad for personal reasons, it's hard to say anything has defined Vancouver's season more so far than the team's ability to at least tread water without No. 1 goalie Thatcher Demko all year, goal-scorer Brock Boeser since early November and now, a huge forward piece in Miller.
- 16. Colorado Avalanche (10-9-0)** The Avs are starting to get some bodies back, but — in addition to sub-par goaltending — the support-staff injuries up and down the lineup have killed this club.
- 17. Buffalo Sabres (9-9-1)** Honestly, the story of Buffalo's quarter-season might be that the Sabres started 1-4-1 and didn't let that torpedo their year. In other seasons, it feels like that stumble would have snowballed into disaster. Instead, Buffalo is still in position to challenge for the final playoff spot in the East. It's not glamorous, but it's something.
- 18. Seattle Kraken (10-9-1)** The story of the Kraken's season is swings. They went 4-2-0 to start, stumbled through a 2-6-1 stretch and have followed that by going 5-1-0 on a homestand where they basically had to have nine or 10 of 12 available points. Stay tuned; Seattle now plays seven of nine on the road.
- 19. New York Islanders (7-7-5)** As always, it's a death struggle for this team to score. The Isles are averaging 2.53 goals per game, fewer than all but five teams in the NHL.
- 20. Boston Bruins (8-9-3)** The axing of Jim Montgomery somehow feels simultaneously shocking and predictable. He had huge regular season success in Boston, yet entered this year without an extension coaching a roster with less talent than people realize and a goalie tandem that went from Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman to a late-arriving Swayman (following drawn-out contract negotiations) and

Joonas Korpi. The Bruins can still get into a playoff spot, but it sure feels like they'll be in an unfamiliar dogfight the rest of the way.

**21. Anaheim Ducks (8-8-2)** The Ducks allow the most shots against per game (35.6) and have the second-worst expected goals-for percentage (42.49 per cent) according to MoneyPuck. But MoneyPuck will also tell you 24-year-old Lukas Dostal has the most goals saved above expected (13.7) of any goalie in the league, which is why Anaheim is a .500 club.

**22. Philadelphia Flyers (8-10-2)** Matvei Michkov — who is still 19 for a couple more weeks and leads all freshmen with six tallies — has already shown he's going to be a franchise-defining offensive player. He's on pace for 68 points this season.

**23. Ottawa Senators (8-9-1)** Another crummy November — Ottawa won just two 60-minute games in the 11th month last year — has this team feeling stuck in the mud. The Sens are 3-5-1 since Nov. 1 this season.

**24. Utah Hockey Club (7-8-3)** Nothing can dampen the joy of hockey in a new city, but UHC was obviously in trouble once both Sean Durzi and John Marino were lost long-term from the blue line. After a good start, the Hockey Club is 3-7-2.

**25. St. Louis Blues (8-11-1)** St. Louis was without its top centre, Robert Thomas, for most of the first quarter. He returned this week, so let's see if he can give the Blues a boost and get them better positioned by the halfway point of the year.

**26. Detroit Red Wings (7-9-2)** Detroit's poor first-quarter performance makes you wonder if the second quarter will be defined by hiring Jim Montgomery to coach the team.

**27. Pittsburgh Penguins (7-10-4)** The Pens have already shipped out Lars Eller as part of the realization this roster is nowhere good enough to compete, likely even for a playoff spot. The first quarter of this season has crystalized Pittsburgh's true standing in the league.

**28. Montreal Canadiens (7-10-2)** The Canadiens have steadied the ship a little in the past week, allowing us to put the focus on how good rookie Lane Hutson has been. The undersized defenceman has recorded 11 assists while playing 23 minutes a night in 19 games.

**29. Columbus Blue Jackets (7-9-2)** It's an all-or-nothing offence in Columbus. The Jackets have scored six goals in a game on five occasions, but have netted two or fewer in 10 of their remaining 14 contests.

**30. San Jose Sharks (6-11-4)** For a team that started 0-7-2, going 6-4-2 since then is massive as San Jose has kept true misery at bay during Macklin Celebrini's first season. They have a .500 points percentage in the nine games Celebrini has played.

**31. Nashville Predators (6-11-3)** The first quarter of Nashville's season is what it looks like when an all-in play blows up in your face. The Preds need a sizzling second quarter to make this nightmare stop.

**32. Chicago Blackhawks (6-12-1)** There's no getting around what a disappointment Connor Bedard's three goals are right now. More than that, it felt like — after a flurry of good-looking free-agent moves — this team had a chance to jump up the standings a bit. Instead, you can see where it is right now.