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Columbus Dispatch / 3 reasons why Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski is a Norris Trophy finalist

By Brian Hedger – April 29, 2025

Zach Werenski is a finalist for the Norris Trophy, which is awarded to the NHL's top defenseman.

The league released a list of three finalists on April 29 that includes Werenski — the Blue Jackets' leading scorer — plus Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche and Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks. Hughes won it last season, Makar won for 2021-22 and Werenski is a finalist for the first time in his nine-year NHL career.

The winner will be announced in late June, after the Stanley Cup Final, at the NHL's awards show in a yet-to-be announced location. Werenski is also the Columbus nominee for the King Clancy Memorial Trophy (leadership, humanitarian efforts).

"Zach was a crucial part of how we started the season, how he took the team on his shoulders and ran with it," Waddell said. "I believe this was his best pro season ever, and he was determined from the start of the year. You could see it in Game 1, that he was going to be the guy that's going to make this team roll, and he certainly didn't let us down."

Other Blue Jackets who could be named finalists for awards included center Sean Monahan for the Masterton Trophy (perseverance/dedication to hockey), Dean Evason for the Jack Adams Award (coach of the year) and president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell for the Jim Gregory General Manager of the Year Award.

The Norris Trophy is awarded annually, "to the defense player who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-round ability in the position," and the winner is chosen a vote among members of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association.

Winners are typically the NHL's highest-scoring defenseman, which makes Makar a heavy favorite after leading the league's defensemen in goals (30), assists (62) and points (92). Werenski finished second among defensemen in goals (23) and points (82) while finishing fourth in assists (59).

Hughes, who missed the most time of the three finalists due to injury, finished tied for second in assists (60), third in points (76) and tied for seventh in goals (16). Aside from those numbers, here are three more reasons Werenski deserves to be a finalist for the Norris Trophy:

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski topped NHL in ice time

Werenski led the league in ice time by skating 2,166:22 minutes for an average of 26:45 per game. That was a full minute longer than Makar and Hughes.

Combined with playing for the U.S. at the NHL's 4 Nations tournament in February — leading all scorers with six points in four games — Werenski eventually showed signs of exhaustion down the stretch. Even with somewhat sluggish legs, he was the Blue Jackets' top player and continued to log massive ice times.

According to the league's NHL EDGE advanced stats, Werenski led all skaters in total distance skated by logging 320.25 miles through his 81 games. That's 16.49 miles longer than Makar, who finished second in the league in distance. Werenski's distance is also the most since 2021-22, when the NHL first started tracking the statistic through its NHL EDGE data.

“I’m not tired,” Werenski said April 18 at the Blue Jackets’ parting press conference. “I wish I was still playing. I wish I was playing in the playoffs. I put a lot of work in last summer to be ready for this. I wanted to take steps forward this year with my game, conditioning, all that stuff ... to show in the playoffs what I can do and what this team can do, and we’re not there. Obviously, it’s been a lot of hockey and there (were) days I was tired, but I’m more motivated than ever to play in the playoffs.”

Zach Werenski led Columbus Blue Jackets with prolific season

Werenski put together one of the best seasons in franchise history regardless of position and the best by a defenseman by a wide margin, topping himself in the latter category.

Werenski's 82 points tied Artemi Panarin (2017-18) for third most in franchise history, trailing only Panarin's 87 in 2018-19. His 23 goals topped his previous franchise record of 20 set in 2019-20, his 59 assists shattered his own high of 46 in 2023-24 and Werenski's point total obliterated the Jackets' prior high of 57 in a season reached by Werenski and Seth Jones (2017-18), his former defense partner.

Werenski also became the Jackets' all-time assists leader on March 9, surpassing Rick Nash with his 259th career assist. He ranks third in franchise history in points and sixth in goals (tied) and games played with 113-271-384 in 567 career games in nine seasons for the Blue Jackets, who selected Werenski eighth overall in 2015.

Werenski also etched his name into the NHL's record books with a 22-game home point streak that tied Phil Housley's 22-game streak in 1991-92 for third-longest in league history — trailing only Paul Coffey's 23-game streak in 1985-86 for the Edmonton Oilers and Bobby Orr's 25-game streak in 1973-74 for the Boston Bruins.

Zach Werenski is a two-way impact player for Columbus Blue Jackets

Werenski entered the NHL as what former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella termed a “rover” who plays more like a fourth forward that starts at the blue line.

During his nine NHL seasons, Werenski has worked to become a two-way, top-pairing defenseman who is trustworthy in his own zone and still scores like a top forward. His smooth skating stride often makes it look easy, but it's not.

Werenski routinely faces tough defensive assignments while also facing most of the league's best defenders when the puck's on his stick. He's become an adept quarterback of the top power-play unit, logs regular minutes killing penalties, rarely leaves the ice during the final minutes of regulation in close games and has plenty of energy left to play extended 3-on-3 overtime shifts.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 2024-25 report card: Not quite straight As but close

By Brian Hedger – April 29, 2025

The next step will be tougher.

The Blue Jackets made a big stride during a surprising push toward the playoffs that fell two points short. Given Columbus was dealing with another spate of injuries, the tragic loss of Johnny Gaudreau on Aug. 29, 2024, and the departure of now-Canadiens forward Patrik Laine after he demanded a trade, the Jackets became the NHL's best story while defying gloomy projections.

Was it a successful season? Yes and no.

"Our coaching staff, we're extremely positive, but there's some negativity, too, that we're not playing (in the playoffs)," head coach Dean Evason said. "Are we excited about some things that happened this year and how we handled some things? Absolutely, 100%, but at the end of the day, it's still a negative feeling right now."

Keeping that in mind, here's a look at the Blue Jackets' report card for 2024-25:

Columbus Blue Jackets offense: A

Inconsistencies contributed to the Blue Jackets not qualifying for the playoffs, and that's the reason this grade doesn't have a "+" after it.

They set a franchise record for goals with 267, had five players score 20-plus goals, two finish with 31 and star Zach Werenski led the team offensively while shattering his own franchise records for scoring by a defenseman with 23 goals, 59 assists and 82 points.

The Blue Jackets also set a franchise record for the number of games they scored six-plus goals, doing that 16 times, but they were also shut out nine times. Two extended scoring droughts, one in November and another in March, essentially sunk their playoff hopes.

Overall, however, the Blue Jackets' offense flexed considerable scoring muscle. Get the cannon ready for heavy ordnance.

Columbus Blue Jackets defense: B-

Start with some good news first.

The Blue Jackets allowed fewer goals for a second straight season after giving up a franchise-high 329 in 2022-23. They also broke even in goal differential with 267 scored and 267 allowed.

That trend must continue.

The number of goals the Jackets allowed still ranks fifth most in the team's 24-year history, which isn't good enough for a team harboring playoff aspirations. How much of that responsibility falls on the Jackets' defensive play and how much rests with their goaltenders?

That's a fair question, but it's not all on the netminders. The defense in front of them still needs work.

They can build around Werenski. The Jacket anchors the blue line and is finally getting recognition outside of Columbus for his excellence, which is more than his offensive contributions.

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltending: D+

There's no easy way to put this one.

The Blue Jackets' goaltending, in general, must improve quite a bit if they want to make a return to the playoffs for the first time since the COVID "bubbles" of 2020. Elvis Merzlikins was better than his previous two seasons but still struggles with consistency. Daniil Tarasov received inconsistent playing time and has regressed since landing the backup role.

Merzlikins' .892 save percentage ranked 23 among goalies who played starters' minutes, while Tarasov's .881 ranked 20th out of 24 who played between 15 and 30 games.

The one bright spot was rookie Jet Greaves, whose sizzling numbers during a five-game winning streak to close the season, as Merzlikins was out with a concussion, earned him the NHL's final "first star of the week" honors.

Merzlikins still has two years left on a contract that carries a \$5.4 million annual charge against the NHL's salary cap, and Tarasov is a pending restricted free agent. General manager Don Waddell has left open the possibility that nothing changes in the Blue Jackets' goaltending depth chart to start next season, but Greaves' excellence at the NHL level over parts of three seasons shouldn't be brushed aside.

Waddell also doesn't seem ready to swallow the bitter pill of buying out the remainder of Merzlikins' contract to make him a free agent, but a fresh start might be what's best for both him and the Blue Jackets at this point.

Columbus Blue Jackets coaching: A

Evason's hiring was announced on July 22, 2024, which is late for bringing a new coach on board. After meeting with reporters in Columbus a day later, the Jackets' new bench boss got to work making calls to players and meeting with his staff.

Evason also booked a flight to Philadelphia to meet Gaudreau, his new star left wing, in person. A month later, Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed when struck by a drunk driver as they biked together in South Jersey.

That tragedy tore the Blue Jackets apart emotionally, just a few weeks before the start of training camp. It also bound them even tighter. That included Evason. Handed a daunting task amid an unthinkable tragedy, the Blue Jackets and their coaches pulled it all together for an impressive season,

Incorporating Gaudreau into almost every facet of their season, the Jackets played for their former teammate while playing hard for their new head coach.

There are plenty of areas within the staff's performance that could be dissected here — both special teams had their moments, good and bad — but everything must be looked at through the Gaudreau lens.

They downplayed it, but this Blue Jackets season was nothing short of incredible.

Columbus Blue Jackets front office: A

Under Waddell's guidance, the Blue Jackets parted ways with Pascal Vincent, hired Evason, subtracted a handful of players who didn't fit into the picture and acquiesced to Laine's trade request before the Gaudreau tragedy.

Waddell also found key veteran pieces to round out his roster from the preseason right to the end.

James van Riemsdyk was a fantastic veteran free-agent signing, Zach Aston-Reece and Dante Fabbro were great waiver claims and the decision to keep Provorov rather than spinning him off at the trade deadline sent a strong message to a team that battled hard to stay in the playoff race.

Time will tell if Waddell's first big draft pick pans out, but he's got the benefit of the doubt for now after taking Cayden Lindstrom (back surgery) fourth overall. Waddell is now diving into this summer's "to-do" list with an eye on next year's playoffs. That's encouraging for a fan base that has mostly dealt with the frustration of ongoing disappointment throughout the team's existence.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson to join Dean Evason at worlds

By Brian Hedger – April 28, 2025

Two Blue Jackets players and an assistant will join coach Dean Evason on Canada's team for the men's world championship May 9-25 in Sweden and Denmark.

Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson and assistant coach Steve McCarthy have agreed to join Evason in Stockholm, Sweden, where the Jackets' coach will run Canada's bench. Johnson and Fantilli each finished within the top five in scoring for the Blue Jackets while having breakout seasons.

Johnson finished with 24 goals, 33 assists, 57 points and a +2 plus/minus rating in 68 games after missing roughly a month with a shoulder injury early in the season. Fantilli played all 82 games after missing half of his rookie season with a lacerated calf muscle, finishing with 31 goals, 23 assists and 54 points with a +4 rating.

Fantilli got off to a slow start but thrived when pressed into service as the Jackets' top center for about two months while Sean Monahan recovered from wrist surgery.

Johnson had a fantastic preseason and looked like a breakout candidate before a flukish fall in the season's fourth game caused an injury to the same shoulder that required season-ending surgery in March 2024. After missing 14 games while rehabbing, the highly skilled playmaking wing returned to form and produced at almost a point-per-game pace.

McCarthy just signed a contract extension to remain part of Evason's staff in Columbus. An inherited member of staffs run by former coaches Brad Larsen and Pascal Vincent, McCarthy impressed a third straight coach while working with the Jackets' defensemen and coordinating the penalty kill units.

Thus far, the only Blue Jackets who've agreed to play in the world championship are Canadians. Goalie Elvis Merzlikins was extended an offer to play for his country, Latvia, but declined the opportunity after coming off a concussion while focused on family and personal matters.

Canada's opening game in Group A is against Slovenia on May 10 in Stockholm, where the medal rounds will also be held. The U.S. team, which doesn't have any Blue Jackets representation, will play in Group B in Herning, Denmark.

NBC4i.com / Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski named finalist for Norris Trophy

By Kevin Accettulla – April 29, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski has been named a finalist for the NHL's Norris Trophy, which is an award given to the league's best defenseman.

Werenski, the team's all-time assists leader, finished the season with 82 points (23 goals and 59 assists), which is a franchise record for a defenseman. He led the Jackets in assists, points, multi-assist and multi-point efforts. It is the first time a Columbus player has been named a finalist for the Norris Trophy.

The Blue Jackets said Werenski is the first U.S.-born defenseman to record 23 or more goals in a season since Brian Leetch in the 1993-94 season with the New York Rangers.

The other two finalists for the award are Cale Makar, of the Colorado Avalanche, and Quinn Hughes, of the Vancouver Canucks. Oddsmakers have Makar as the overwhelming favorite to win the award for the second time in four seasons. The 26-year-old Canadian led all defensemen in the regular season in points (92), goals (30), and assists (62).

The award is voted on by the Professional Hockey Writers Association at the conclusion of the regular season. The three players with the highest vote totals are named finalists. The winner will be announced at a later date.

Spectrum News One / Columbus Blue Jackets Zach Werenski named finalist for James Norris Memorial Trophy

By Madison MacArthur – Apr. 29, 2025

While the Columbus Blue Jackets might be missing the playoffs, one defenseman is in the finals for the James Norris Memorial Trophy.

Zach Werenski is among three finalists for the award, which is given annually to the NHL's top defensive player who demonstrates the greatest all-around ability throughout the season. The two other finalists are Colorado's Cale Makar and Vancouver's Quinn Hughes.

Werenski set single-season franchise records among defensemen scoring 23 goals, and 59 assists for 82 points with 298 shots on goal on 26:45 of ice time in 81 appearances this season. The 27-year-old Michigan native led the NHL in total time on ice, 2,166:22 and ice time and finished third in shots on goal.

He led the league blueliners in even strength goals, 17, even strength points, tied at 54, and shots on goal. He ranked second in goals, points, power play goals, tied 5, and game-winning goals, 5, and fourth in assists.

Werenski led the Blue Jackets in assists, points, multi-assist, 14, multi-point efforts, 22, and shots on goals while ranking second in goals and points-per-game, 1.01. He matched the franchise mark for assists in a season, held by Artemi Panarin during the 2018-2019 season, and tied for the second-most points in a campaign, matching Panarin's record during the 2017-2018 season.

He is the first U.S.-born blueliner to record 23-plus goals in a campaign since Brian Leetch in 1993-1994, as well as 20 goals and 80 points since Gary Suter in 1992-1993, 23-58-81, 81 GP. Werenski also tied Phil Housley, 22 GP in 1991-92, for the third-longest home points streak by a defenseman in league history with 14-27-41 in 22 contests from November 1-February 22.

On March 9, the blueliner became the Blue Jacket's all-time assists leader, surpassing Rick Nash with his 259th career helper. Werenski ranks third on the club's all-time list in points, is tied for sixth in goals and games played with 113-271-384 in 567 career games in nine NHL seasons with the teams.

Werenski was selected by Columbus in the first round at the eighth pick in the 2015 NHL draft.

WBNS 10TV / Blue Jackets release stops for 2025 Summer Mobile Tour

By Staff – April 27, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets are bringing back their summer tour to fans in Ohio this year.

This year's Summer Mobile Tour includes eight new stops and runs from April 26 through September.

Fans of all ages — from season ticket holders to first-time hockey fans — are invited to this experience, which allows them to celebrate the game and connect with the team.

The Summer Mobile Tour will visit community festivals, fairs, parks and special events throughout the state.

The tour features a custom-wrapped Blue Jackets vehicle with fan gear and interactive games, as well as photo opportunities and chances to win autographed items and tickets to 2025–26 season games.

Select stops will also include special appearances by the Blue Jackets' mascot, Stinger.

The stops for this year's mobile tour include the following:

Apr. 26 - Cap City Marathon

May 17-19 - Delaware Arts Festival*

May 24-25 - Columbus Taco Fest*

June 7-8 - Troy Strawberry Festival*

June 13-15 - Creekside Blues & Jazz Fest*

June 14 - Columbus PRIDE Parade

June 22 - Stonewall Family Pride*

June 25 – Washington Park, Cincinnati*

June 27 - NHL Draft Party

June 28 - Grandview Hop

July 3 - Red, White & Boom Parade

July 4 - Upper Arlington 4th of July Parade

July 5-6 - Mid-Ohio IndyCar*

July 18-20 - Jazz & Rib Fest

Aug. 1-3 - Dublin Irish Festival

Aug. 16-17 - Columbus Food Truck Festival

Aug. 22-24 - Columbus Air Show

Aug. 25 - Buck-i-Frenzy

Sept. 5-7 – OktoberFest*

* = new locations

For more information about the tour, visit the Columbus Blue Jackets website.

The Hockey Writers / The Case for Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski to Win the Norris Trophy

By Nicholas Arnold – April 30, 2025

After a couple of difficult seasons for the Columbus Blue Jackets, from a performance standpoint, 2024-25 was a taxing one for a different reason. Just after an organizational restructure which seemed so positive, hiring a new coach and general manager, things plunged back into darkness as an unimaginable tragedy befell the team. In the wake of the tragedy came a wave of support from throughout the hockey community and a surge of success from the Blue Jackets on the ice. Players throughout the lineup stepped up, and several had the best seasons of their careers.

One of those players was their top defenseman, Zach Werenski. He's a guy who I'm not sure I thought couldn't get any better: a 20-goal caliber defender who put up 11 goals and 57 points through 70 games in 2023-24. However, he found a way to do it, leading all NHLers in ice time this season and becoming the first Blue Jackets' defenseman and only the second player to put up over 80 points in a season. He led the team in scoring and outscored second-place Kirill Marchenko by eight points, and only trailed Cale Makar in league scoring by a defender.

For all his hard work, Werenski became the first Blue Jacket to be named a finalist for the James Norris Trophy as the NHL's best defenseman. Alongside him are perennial contenders for the award, Makar from the Colorado Avalanche and Quinn Hughes from the Vancouver Canucks. Let's break down the case for Werenski to win and not to win the Norris.

Case For Werenski to Win the Norris

For the award this year, I think it's safe to say this is a two-horse race between Makar and Werenski. There are a couple of knocks against Hughes that hurt his candidacy. One is that he missed 14 games with injury, and availability is a hair that many split when trying to separate top awards candidates. The other is that his team missed the playoffs. Don't get me wrong, what Hughes was able to accomplish this season has been nothing short of spectacular. He led the Canucks in scoring by a significant margin and was their one bright spot in a season of disappointment. He would be right up there with the other two finalists if he had only one of those knocks, but both are too much in a year like this.

So, if not Hughes, why should it be Werenski? His team missed the playoffs, too, yes. However, their playoff elimination came on the last day of the regular season. It was very close to going the Jackets' way. There's an argument to be made that they would have been nowhere close to contention without his play being at the level it was.

When you look at Makar, he is an exceptional talent. However, he's lumped in with a perennial Hart Trophy and Art Ross Trophy candidate in Nathan MacKinnon and a cast of other offensive threats. There's a reason the Avalanche are consistently in the mix as Stanley Cup contenders, he's surrounded by a wealth of talent. While Makar is a big piece of that, one could argue that he's not the most important player on the roster because he finished second in team scoring by 24 points. That same argument cannot be made when looking at the Blue Jackets roster.

To put it a different way, Makar spent the season with another surefire Hall of Fame player in MacKinnon, half a season with likely Hall of Fame player Mikko Rantanen, and was paired with fellow Team Canada roster player, Devon Toews. Werenski spent the season mostly paired with someone the Nashville Predators gave away on waivers, Dante Fabbro, and his forwards were mostly players that

have less than four campaigns under their belts and zero playoff experience. That gives Werenski a slight edge.

Some stats help keep Werenski in contention as top dog, with the second most goals, 23, and points, 82, among defensemen this season. He skated the most miles of any player (320), 16 more than Makar (304), and his 131 blocked shots were more than Makar's 128 – not by much, I know.

The other thing you have to consider is the compassion of the voter. The Blue Jackets were an underdog story and a media darling all season. To see them come up short of the playoffs when so many were rooting for them based on their difficult season might make some people consider Werenski simply as some way to validate what was an amazing run for Columbus. It also doesn't hurt that Makar has won the award before and Werenski hasn't. Sometimes we see it go to the guy that hasn't won it yet because "It's his turn." I'm not advocating for either of these as legitimate reasons for him to win, but they are factors that I'm sure many considered when filling out their ballots.

Case Against Werenski to Win the Norris

If you look at this from a metrics perspective, the award is likely Makar's for a few simple reasons. Voters like simplicity and any sort of benchmark to point to in justification of their decisions. Here are three points in his favor:

- First defenseman to score 30 goals in a season since 2008-09.
- Outscored Werenski by ten points despite playing in one fewer game.
- His team made the playoffs.

Any of those reasons is enough to make any critic of a ballot shrug his shoulders and say, "Well, I can't argue with that." It would be nice when considering all the storylines that have revolved around the Blue Jackets to put a bow on the season with their first-ever James Norris Trophy win by Werenski. However, if you look objectively and by the numbers, Makar is the better candidate.

The real debate will come down to how the voters weigh the "more important to his team" argument – it's the philosophy that won Taylor Hall the Hart Trophy in 2018. Werenski outscoring his next teammate by ten points, while Makar being outscored by 24 points at the hands of MacKinnon could be the difference. Makar is considered by many to be the greatest defenseman of his generation with cause. He's been revolutionary since joining the league in 2019-20, and by many statistical measures, the 2024-25 season has been his best yet.

With his team missing the playoffs and considering Makar's otherworldly season, Werenski has an uphill battle to win the Norris. There is a phrase uttered by all the scorned actors at the Academy Awards that has a significant amount of truth. The Blue Jackets and Werenski should listen, say it to themselves and believe it because "It truly is an honor just to be nominated."

The Hockey Writers / Columbus Blue Jackets' 2024-25 Player Grades: Goaltenders

By Matthew Buhrmann – April 30, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets gave up 267 goals in the regular season, the eighth-worst total in the NHL. While this points to defensive lapses, goaltending was also a major issue at times. The defensive core left their goalies in tough situations too often, but more consistent netminding could have made all the difference as well. With better goaltending, this team might have been able to trim the difference to make a playoff spot, despite their other struggles.

After grading the forward group and defensive core, it is now time to grade the three netminders who appeared for Columbus this season.

Elvis Merzlikins: C-

Elvis Merzlikins gets a C- for his season. At 31 years old, he was supposed to bring consistency and veteran stability to the net, but his play was up and down once again. He played a team-high 53 games, logging 3,171 minutes. Over that time, he faced 1,557 shots, made 1,389 saves, and allowed 168 goals. This gave him a goals-against average (GAA) of 3.18 and a save percentage (SV%) of .892, with a 26-21-1 record and one shutout, his best record as a Blue Jacket by a long shot.

Off the ice, Merzlikins made improvements as a leader in the locker room, which was a bright spot. He acknowledged that he'd been closed off in previous years but felt that this season's team chemistry helped him open up more. "When I came here for the start of the season, the training camp, the locker room was different. I saw the locker room was completely different. This locker room, what we have today, we have love going on there. And from start of season to the end of season, it got just better and better and better. Two or three years ago, I didn't feel that, maybe it was me because I was kind of closed in, in my own world."

That said, whether fans like it or not, Merzlikins will likely remain with the Blue Jackets. His contract makes it hard to move him, and general manager Don Waddell has made it clear that a buyout isn't on the table, only a potential trade. "That's not something we're looking at," Waddell said. "I can't say how the summer's going to play out, but as of now, we haven't talked about it." While he's shown leadership growth, Merzlikins hasn't proven he can be the number one goalie for this organization in the long term. I love the guy, but at best, he might be more suited as a backup if his play doesn't improve to starter level.

Daniil Tarasov: D+

Daniil Tarasov earns a D+ for his performance this season. At 26 years old, he had a chance to establish himself as a key part of the goaltending tandem, but he struggled to follow up on the promise he showed last season. In 20 games, he logged 1,100 minutes, faced 544 shots, made 479 saves, and allowed 65 goals. He finished with a GAA of 3.54, a SV% of .881, and a 7-10-2 record, including one shutout.

Last season, Tarasov's numbers were more encouraging. He played 24 games in the NHL with a GAA of 3.18, a SV% of .908, and an 8-11-3 record. Even in the American Hockey League (AHL), his performance dipped. In 2023-24, he played four games for the Cleveland Monsters, posting a GAA of 2.57 and a SV% of .915. This season, he appeared in just two AHL games, finishing with a 2.96 GAA and a .908 SV%.

Tarasov is a restricted free agent (RFA) with arbitration rights, and his future feels uncertain. He was relegated to third string when Jet Greaves was called up, and it's hard to see how he fits into the long-term plan. While he occasionally plays well, his inconsistency is a major issue. Tarasov's performance this season cost the team critical points in the standings, and with the need to reduce his goals against, I don't think he's part of the solution moving forward.

Jet Greaves: A-

Greaves was a bright spot for the Blue Jackets this season, earning an A- for his play between the pipes. At 24 years old, he was called up mid-season a few times when Merzlikins was out. Although he didn't stand out right away, Greaves made a ton of starts between Cleveland and Columbus toward the end of the season, and that's when he really began to "take off". Over 11 NHL games, he played 660 minutes, faced 339 shots, made 318 saves, and allowed 21 goals. He finished with a GAA of 1.91, a SV% of .938, and a 7-2-0 record with two shutouts.

What's exciting about Greaves is how much potential he has as a young netminder. He's got huge upside, and in my opinion, he could be "the guy" for the team next season. Right now, he's helping Cleveland in the Calder Cup Playoffs, where he's already off to a strong start. In two playoff games against the Toronto Marlies, he has a GAA of 2.13, a SV% of .914, with a 2-0-0 record. Greaves has shown that he's ready for a bigger role, and it's time to see if he can keep up that level of play over a full season. He has all the tools to solidify himself as a key part of the Blue Jackets' future in my eyes.

The Blue Jackets' goaltending didn't meet expectations this season. Merzlikins struggled with consistency, Tarasov regressed, and while the defense let them down occasionally, the goaltenders didn't do enough to make up for it. Greaves was the clear bright spot in net, and the staff would be wise to bet on him moving forward.

The Hockey Writers / Columbus Blue Jackets' 2024-25 Player Grades: Defensemen

By Matthew Buhrmann – April 29, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets' defensive core had a solid season overall, with strong contributions from their top-end players leading the way. However, the bottom-pairing defensemen struggled at times, with defensive breakdowns contributing to the team's inconsistency at times.

After evaluating the forwards in a prior article, it's now time to grade the defensemen, with the goaltenders coming up soon too.

Zach Werenski: A+

Zach Werenski was the standout player on the Blue Jackets' blue line and led the entire team in scoring with 82 points (23 goals, 59 assists) over 81 games. He averaged an impressive 1.01 points-per-game (P/G) while logging a team-leading 26:44 of ice time per game—including 22:27 at even strength, 2:41 on the power play, and 1:35 on the penalty kill. Werenski was as reliable as they come, adding 54 hits and ranking second on the team with 131 blocked shots, earning him a high A+ grade.

Werenski set the tone for the season early. He talked about the importance of finding success and reflected on the team's progress at the end: "It's hard as a competitor to say it was successful when you miss the playoffs," Werenski said. "At the end of the day, that's your goal and you want to be competing for the Stanley Cup, and we're not doing that. Although we're just short, it's still short of it. So definitely feel like in a sense we made huge progress this year and took steps in the right direction. But I don't know if I'd use the word successful. I feel like it's still a process and still a long ways to go to get to where we ultimately want to be and just continue to work at that."

Ivan Provorov: B

Ivan Provorov had a solid season and proved to be a dependable two-way defenseman. Playing all 82 games, he contributed 33 points (seven goals, 26 assists) for 0.40 P/G. He averaged 23:21 of ice time per game, including 19:47 at even strength, 0:58 on the power play, and 2:36 on the penalty kill. Provorov's defensive contributions included 127 blocked shots and 27 hits, and a plus/minus of plus-11. Though not as flashy offensively as Werenski, Provorov's consistency made him an important part of the Blue Jackets' defensive structure.

When asked about returning to Columbus, Provorov made his intentions clear, stating, "I don't think I was hiding it that I would like to stay." His interest in staying reflects his commitment to the team and his belief in the Blue Jackets' future.

Dante Fabbro: B+

Dante Fabbro was a solid pickup for Columbus this season. Claimed off waivers from the Nashville Predators early on, Fabbro turned into one of the most valuable acquisitions by general manager Don Waddell. Playing in 62 games, he posted 26 points (nine goals, 17 assists) and a solid 0.42 P/G. His impressive plus/minus of plus-23 showed his steady two-way play. He also logged 21:39 of ice time per game, including 19:53 at even strength and 1:40 on the penalty kill, and led the team with 136 blocked shots. He chipped in 26 hits and provided consistent, reliable defense. Fabbro's acquisition was a steal for what Columbus got out of him this season, earning him a B+ in my book.

Fabbro also expressed enthusiasm about returning to the team, saying, "I think I've made it pretty clear I'd love to stay." His strong play and willingness to stick with the Blue Jackets make him an ideal candidate for re-signing this offseason.

Damon Severson: C+

Damon Severson's season didn't live up to expectations, earning him a C+ grade. Playing 70 games, he posted 25 points (six goals, 19 assists) for 0.36 P/G. His defensive lapses were a concern, as his positioning issues led to too many odd-man rushes against the team. Despite his offensive contributions, his struggles defensively limited him. Severson averaged 19:03 of ice time per game, including 17:07 at even strength and 1:21 on the penalty kill. He had 104 blocked shots and 43 hits, finishing with a plus/minus of plus-5; however, that doesn't always mean everything. While Severson provides some back-end scoring, he needs to improve on limiting defensive breakdowns going forward.

Denton Mateychuk: B

Denton Mateychuk had a great rookie season and showed why he was the Blue Jackets' 12th overall pick in the 2022 NHL Draft. In 45 games, he recorded 13 points (four goals, nine assists) for 0.29 P/G and a plus/minus of plus-4. The young defenseman averaged 18:02 of ice time, including 16:24 at even strength and 0:53 on the penalty kill, and contributed 63 blocked shots and 26 hits. His maturity and poise for such a young player stood out.

What makes Mateychuk even more exciting is his huge upside. In the American Hockey League Playoffs with the Cleveland Monsters, he has already tallied four points in just two games. Mateychuk's future with the Blue Jackets looks bright, and it will be thrilling to see how he continues to develop, earning himself a B grade in my eyes.

Jacob Christiansen: C-

Jacob Christiansen had a modest year, earning a C- grade. In 68 games, he recorded eight points (one goal, seven assists) for 0.12 P/G and a plus/minus of plus-6. Christiansen averaged 12:32 of ice time per game, including 12:05 at even strength. While he contributed 65 blocked shots and 50 hits, his limited role on special teams and overall depth position kept his impact minimal. Christiansen will need to improve if he wants to take on a bigger role in the lineup.

Jack Johnson: D+

Jack Johnson's second stint with the Blue Jackets didn't bring much value, earning him a D+ grade. Over 41 games, Johnson tallied six assists and no goals for 0.15 P/G. His plus/minus of minus-13 was the worst in the D-core, reflecting his struggles in the defensive zone. Johnson often found himself as a healthy scratch, averaging 12:52 of ice time per game, including 11:15 at even strength and 1:36 on the penalty kill. At 38 years old, Johnson appears to be near the end of his career and may be close to hanging up his skates. His future with the Blue Jackets remains unclear at this stage.

Jordan Harris: D+

The Jordan Harris trade with Montreal, which sent Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens, didn't bring much back for Columbus. Harris struggled during his 33-game stint, registering five points (one goal, four assists) for 0.15 P/G. His plus/minus of minus-1 reflected his lack of consistency. Harris averaged 11:23 of ice time per game, including 11:13 at even strength, and contributed 35 blocked shots and 23 hits. While it was great to move Laine out of Columbus, Harris has yet to make a significant impact on the back end.

Erik Gudbranson: B-

Erik Gudbranson turned in a decent showing in his 16 games, earning a B- grade. He recorded four assists (0.25 P/G) and a plus/minus of plus-1, while also bringing physicality with 25 hits and 19 blocked shots. Gudbranson averaged 17:46 of ice time per game, including 15:13 at even strength and 2:26 on the penalty kill. His toughness and defensive depth helped stabilize the team at times, though his overall impact was mixed during his short time to begin and end the season.

In total, the Blue Jackets gave up 267 goals in the regular season, which ranked as the eighth-worst total in the NHL. This is an area that needs improvement ahead of next season if the team hopes to make a playoff push, something that Waddell has to address this offseason.

The Hockey Writers / Columbus Blue Jackets' 2024-25 Player Grades: Forwards

By Matthew Buhrmann – April 28, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets weren't expected to make much noise this season. Few outside the organization believed they had what it would take to be competitive, let alone fight for a playoff spot. But this team proved the doubters wrong. They exceeded expectations, competing every night, finishing the 2024-25 season with a solid 42-35-5 record. While they fell just short of the playoffs, they showed tremendous growth, giving the fifth line plenty to be proud of.

What truly set this group apart was their attitude. The Blue Jackets never quit, even when the odds were stacked against them. They capped off their season with a six-game winning streak and went 7-3-0 in their final 10 games, refusing to let the disappointment of being eliminated stop them from finishing strong in their final game vs the New York Islanders at home.

Now, as we turn our focus to the forward group that helped drive this franchise record 273-goal campaign, it's time to evaluate the individual performances that defined their season.

Kirill Marchenko: A+

Kirill Marchenko had his best season in the NHL this past season, putting up great numbers in his third NHL season with 31 goals and 43 assists for a total of 74 points in 79 games. That's 32 more points than he had two seasons ago when he tallied just 42 in 2023-24. He's been a versatile forward, consistently playing on the top line while occasionally dropping to the second line and adapting to a wide variety of linemates throughout his career so far.

Marchenko's ability to contribute in all situations—evident in his 1.27 goals per 60 minutes and 3.02 points per 60—makes him a key piece for his team. His 15% shooting accuracy and big-time late-game performances, including game-winning and overtime goals, only further prove to increase his future value. A true future star deserving of the highest praise, Marchenko earns an A+ this season.

Kent Johnson: A-

Kent Johnson proved he's a key piece of the team's future with 24 goals and 33 assists for 57 points in 68 games. His creativity with the puck and ability to make plays in high-pressure situations were game changers for his team. Johnson's even-strength production of 2.42 points per 60 minutes stands out, and his shooting percentage of 19.5% shows just how efficient he was with his opportunities, firing a total of 123 shots on the season. Scoring four game-winning goals only adds to his reputation as someone who delivers when it matters most. Johnson continues to grow into his role and earns a well-deserved A in my book.

Sean Monahan: A

Sean Monahan put together an incredible season with 19 goals and 38 assists for 57 points in just 54 games. He thrived as the team's top-line center under Dean Evason and was dominant in the faceoff circle with the second-highest win rate on the team at 52.6%. Monahan was also key on the power play, leading the team with 6.06 points per 60 minutes on the man advantage.

In early January, Monahan suffered a wrist injury that sidelined him for 11 weeks, which had a noticeable impact on the team's chemistry and overall performance. Despite the setback, Monahan returned strong, showing incredible resilience as he finished the season on a high note.

Off the ice, Monahan has expressed how much he loves Columbus, saying, "I love it. My family loves it. It feels like home from day one and is most likely my forever home." Considering everything he's been through, including losing his best friend Johnny Gaudreau last August, Monahan's connection to the city and team speaks volumes. With much more to come about him in the coming weeks, Monahan's A grade reflects not only his performance but also his importance to the organization.

Adam Fantilli: A

Adam Fantilli had a standout second season in the NHL, scoring 31 goals and adding 23 assists for 54 points in 82 games. He played every game and showcased his ability to dominate with two hat tricks during the season, one on the road in Toronto. Fantilli's physicality added an edge to his game this season as well, laying 113 hits and recording 56 blocked shots.

Beyond the stats, Fantilli's mindset and drive to improve stood out: "I'll never get to a point where I can say I've figured out the NHL and just sit back and relax. That's never gonna happen." His constant desire to learn and grow, paired with his high level of skill, makes Fantilli a huge piece of the team's future. He earns an A for his achievements this season and the potential he continues to show.

Dmitri Voronkov: B+

Dmitri Voronkov had a solid season with 23 goals and 24 assists for 47 points in 73 games. His physical play, highlighted by 71 hits, and reliability at even strength made him an important part of the roster. However, there's room for growth in consistent offensive production, especially toward the end of the season. Voronkov stands out as a good two-way forward who plays strong defensively and on the back-check, earning him a B+ for his contributions and potential for next season.

James van Riemsdyk: B

35-year-old James van Riemsdyk brought veteran stability to the team with 16 goals and 20 assists for 36 points in 71 games. Despite averaging just 12:24 of ice time per game, he was highly efficient with an 18.8% shooting percentage. Over the course of the season, van Riemsdyk's ice time was the lowest of his career. Despite that, he was still able to put up the same offensive numbers as he had with the Boston Bruins and Philadelphia Flyers in the past couple of seasons.

Van Riemsdyk has expressed interest in re-signing with the Blue Jackets, stating he'd be open to staying if the opportunity presents itself. Overall, he earns a solid B for his consistent contributions and experience in the bottom six of the forward group, but he still has more room to grow.

Cole Sillinger: B

Cole Sillinger wrapped up his third full NHL season, appearing in 66 games and scoring 11 goals with 22 assists for 33 points. While his numbers improved slightly from last season, his minus-11 plus/minus rating points to some defensive struggles. After a tough second season in 2022-23, where he managed just 11 points in 64 games, Sillinger rebounded last season with 32 points in 77 games. This season continued that progress, showing his ability to work hard and contribute consistently. At just 21 years old, Sillinger earns a B, with more room to grow into a reliable two-way forward for this team.

Mathieu Olivier: A-

Mathieu Olivier was a force for the Blue Jackets throughout all 82 games, scoring 18 goals and adding 14 assists for 32 points. He led the team in hits with an impressive 306 and racked up 139 penalty minutes, always stepping up to protect his teammates and bring physicality to the ice. Many of Olivier's goals came in gritty, hard-working fashion, as he made his presence known in front of the net.

He scores most of his goals by tipping in shots and capitalizing on rebounds, showcasing his knack for creating offense in tough areas. General manager Don Waddell's decision to extend Olivier's contract reflects just how much the team values his impact. Olivier earns an A-, recognizing his toughness and ability to contribute offensively in a big way for this younger squad.

Justin Danforth: B

Justin Danforth had a solid season, putting up nine goals and 12 assists for 21 points in 61 games. He averaged 12:36 of ice time per game and brought consistent energy and effort every shift. He was a key piece on the penalty kill, adding short-handed goals and assists, which showed his ability to make the most of defensive situations.

His standout moment of the season came in the Stadium Series game against the Detroit Red Wings. With just over two minutes left, Danforth scored the game-winning goal, securing the victory in one of the team's biggest games in front of a sold-out Ohio Stadium.

Danforth wasn't logging as much ice time as some of the bigger names this season, but he made his minutes count with smart, hard-working play. His versatility made him a player the staff can depend on in different in-game situations. He earns a B for being a steady, dependable presence and contributing in all three zones.

Boone Jenner: A-

Boone Jenner, captain of the Blue Jackets, had a short season due to injury, playing in just 26 games. Even so, he recorded seven goals and 12 assists for 19 points, averaging 0.73 points per game—a solid pace that ranks among the best of his career. He made his presence felt in the faceoff circle, with a faceoff win rate of 51.22%, proving his reliability in big situations, taking draws late in games.

After recovering from his injury, Jenner wasted no time stepping back into his role as the team leader, both on the ice and in the locker room. He brought physicality, played key minutes, and showed his resilience during what was a tough season for him. Coach Dean Evason values Jenner's contributions so much that their end-of-season review might even happen over lunch rather than a formal meeting, showing the bond between them. Jenner earns an A-, highlighting his leadership and ability to push through adversity while consistently delivering for his team.

Zach Aston-Reese: B-

Zach Aston-Reese played 79 games, contributing six goals and 11 assists for 17 points. He brought physicality with 179 hits and was solid on the penalty kill, but had limited offensive production. Aston-Reese earns a B-, steady but with room to grow offensively for next season, hopefully to help round out the bottom six of the forward group.

Sean Kuraly: B-

Sean Kuraly appeared in all 82 games, recording six goals and 11 assists for 17 points. His 54.3% faceoff win rate was the best on the team, but his future in Columbus remains unclear. Reflecting on what might have been his final game, Kuraly shared, "I was trying to go out there and enjoy it and soak it all in. You really never know what's next, so how do you stay in the moment but realize that there's some reality to these things?" Kuraly earns a B- for his contributions, though what's next for him is uncertain.

Yegor Chinakhov: B-

Yegor Chinakhov started the season strong with seven goals and seven assists for 14 points in 21 games, but injuries derailed his year once again. A back injury suffered in late November turned what was initially described as "day-to-day" into another long, frustrating recovery process. Chinakhov hasn't

played since Nov. 27, and his inability to stay healthy has become a concerning pattern early in his career. While his talent is clear, his durability remains a major question. He earns a B-, with his promising start overshadowed by another injury-plagued season.

Kevin Labanc: C+

Kevin Labanc played 34 games, contributing two goals and 10 assists for 12 points. While his playmaking ability showed flashes, his overall impact lacked consistency. Labanc earns a C+, with more room for growth into a consistent bottom-six guy.

Mikael Pyyhtiä: B-

Mikael Pyyhtiä had a challenging season in Columbus, scoring four goals and adding three assists for seven points in 47 games. He averaged 11:15 of ice time per game, where he worked hard but struggled to find consistent production in the bottom six. Pyyhtiä has found more success in the American Hockey League (AHL) with the Cleveland Monsters, recording three goals and 13 assists for 16 points in 28 regular-season games. He's also contributing to Cleveland's playoff run with an assist through two games played. Overall, Pyyhtiä earns a B-, showing potential as he develops further in the AHL, maybe seeing more ice-time in the NHL next season.

In my book, the Blue Jackets' forward group was a major bright spot this season, earning an overall A- for their efforts. They showed depth and scoring ability, with key players stepping up and contributing across the lineup. Unfortunately, they lacked the offensive punch in March during the most critical stretch of the playoff race, and it ended up costing them. If this group can find a way to score consistently in those high-pressure moments next season, making the playoffs could very well be within reach.

News 5 Cleveland / Monsters prepare for Laval in North Division Semifinals

By: Carly Mascitti – Apr 29, 2025

After sweeping the Toronto Marlies in the first round of the Calder Cup Playoffs, the Cleveland Monsters are on to the North Division Semifinals. They'll face the Laval Rocket, who finished the regular season with the best record in the AHL.

"I think, where we're at right now, we should feel good about ourselves and know what we need to do and have all the confidence in the world we can beat anyone in one game, just with what we went through here last weekend," said head coach Trent Vogelhuber.

The Monsters moved past the first round best-of-three series after a pair of overtime wins, and they know their opponents are only getting stronger.

"It's a mental battle, and that's what playoffs is. You gotta be able to stick with it. There's gonna be a lot of ups and downs throughout the whole playoffs, and you gotta be emotionally stable," said Monsters center Luca Del Bel Belluz.

"It's not getting any easier. The earlier you realize it, the easier it actually becomes," said Monsters defenseman Denton Mateychuk.

Reinforcements from the Columbus Blue Jackets, goaltender Jet Greaves and Mateychuk have provided a playoff boost.

"There's no more important position this time of year as a goaltender. Jet is as steady as they come back there for us. The best record we had was when Dents was here with us for those 20+ games, and that's not necessarily by accident, so [they're] massive additions," said Vogelhuber.

The Monsters will open the best-of-five semifinals with back-to-back home games, which provides an opportunity to gain an early advantage against the Rocket.

"The mentality is you're the aggressors. They gotta play in our building, and we can bring the fight to them a little bit. That should be the mentality of our guys, so not complaining that we get to start at home," said Vogelhuber.

Game 1 is Wednesday, April 30, and Game 2 is Friday, May 2, at Rocket Arena. Both games start at 7 p.m. The rest of the series will play out at Laval.

ESPN / Offseason keys for NHL teams, including draft, free agency

By Ryan S. Clark & Kristen Shilton – April 30, 2025

This is the place where we look ahead to the offseason for all the teams eliminated from contention: Who will those teams try to add via free agency, trades and the draft? How much better will the team be in 2025-26?

Read on for a look at what went wrong for each eliminated team, along with a breakdown of the biggest keys this offseason and realistic expectations for next season. Note that more teams will be added to this story as they are eliminated.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metro teams were written by Kristen Shilton, and Ryan S. Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific teams. Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space per PuckPedia. Dates listed with each team are when the entry was published. Teams are listed alphabetically by publication date.

Playoff teams

New Jersey Devils

Projected cap space: \$13.86 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 2nd (EDM), 3rd (VGK), 4th, 6th, 6th (SJ)

What went right? New Jersey overcame significant adversities this season to be a playoff team. It's a testament to the Devils' resiliency that even after losing top skater Jack Hughes in March they managed to stay in the hunt and punch their ticket. The Hughes injury highlighted the seasons that some of New Jersey's other burgeoning stars were having, including Jesper Bratt (in an 88-point campaign) and Nico Hischier (a dominant two-way center, who scored 35 goals).

The Devils owed a large portion of their success to improved goaltending from Jacob Markstrom -- and GM Tom Fitzgerald for finally shoring up that position by acquiring Markstrom in the first place. The veteran was solid in the regular season, and soared during the Devils' postseason run as one of the best goaltenders in any first-round series.

New Jersey's first-year head coach Sheldon Keefe managed to implement a solid system and get the Devils to buy in, even when the going got tough. New Jersey should rightly feel good about what a fully healthy lineup can look like moving ahead.

What went wrong? Ah, injuries. They caught up big time for these Devils. Hughes was gone in March, while Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler missed significant time in the regular season before returning. And throughout New Jersey's playoff run, its defensemen began dropping like flies, with Brenden Dillon, Luke Hughes and Johnathan Kovacevic all missing in action. Not even Markstrom's brilliance could account for that many important players sitting out.

The Devils didn't help themselves, though. New Jersey was a whopping 0% on the power play, averaged just 1.75 goals per game and struggled on the penalty kill (69.2%). Outside of Hischier -- who collected three goals in the postseason -- the Devils simply couldn't get rolling offensively.

In a way, it's hard to assess New Jersey's efforts fully given how banged up it became. How much better might the Devils have been across the board had the infirmity not filled up? We'll never know. It's clear that Fitzgerald's inaction at the trade deadline (where he made minor moves such as adding third-line center Cody Glass and blueliner Brian Dumoulin) hurt New Jersey in the long run.

Keys to the offseason: Fitzgerald has a few things to figure out for the Devils. His top priority is pending restricted free agent Luke Hughes and figuring out what the 21-year-old's next contract will look like.

Then there's New Jersey's goaltending, and who will be Markstrom's partner next season. Jake Allen is set to hit free agency, and Nico Daws may not be ready for full-time backup duty.

Free agency should be filled with skaters for Fitzgerald to parse through in order to revamp the Devils' offense. The Devils have five veterans hitting unrestricted free agency, and a pair of RFAs in Glass and Nolan Foote. Inaction didn't serve New Jersey well in the past, and there's a need to infuse their lineup with at least a couple viable scoring threats to keep the Devils from turning top-heavy again next season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New Jersey has felt notoriously hard to predict in recent years. It has oscillated from winning a playoff round to not making the postseason at all. If the Devils can keep (most) everyone available next year, though -- and make some offseason adjustments -- they should expect to be top contenders in the Metro again.

The non-playoff teams

April 16: Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected cap space: \$42.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (MIN), 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 7th (VGK)

What went right? Columbus stayed in the playoff race until the final week. That alone is a victory for this group. The Blue Jackets set out to play meaningful hockey in March and April and that's what they did through a special season that will give Columbus confidence to enter 2025-26 as a viable postseason contender.

Zach Werenski had a Norris Trophy-caliber campaign, with a team-leading 75 points through 76 games. Rising stars Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and Adam Fantilli showed their continued maturity in great seasons. Overall, the Blue Jackets' 11th-ranked offense (with 3.17 goals per game) exceeded expectations. Columbus showed real progress over the course of an emotionally turbulent season.

What went wrong? The Blue Jackets were bitten by the injury bug. Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan all missed significant time with various ailments. That hurt Columbus from the get-go, with no Jenner or Gudbranson for the first few months of the season.

The Blue Jackets' goaltending was subpar too, with Elvis Merzlikins owning a middling .892 save percentage as the club's No. 1. It's no wonder Columbus finished sixth worst in goals-against average (3.42) and they were among the league's worst teams in allowing third-period markers. The Blue Jackets' youth shone through in good ways and bad throughout the year, particularly against tougher opponents, and it's something they'll have to learn from for the season ahead.

Keys to the offseason: Columbus has a pair of first-round draft choices to play with this season, and that's a good thing for GM Don Waddell. He knows how green this franchise still is, and wants to keep building a foundation that the Blue Jackets benefit from for years to come. There are also important RFAs to negotiate with, including Dmitri Voronkov and Daniil Tarasov.

In free agency, Waddell can shift focus to Columbus' netminding. Merzlikins hasn't come up with a season save percentage above .900 since 2021-22. Can Columbus expect to take a step forward if Merzlikins is their go-to guy in the crease next year? Can they give the reins to Jet Greaves, who closed out the season with a dominant stretch?

Waddell wasn't active at the March trade deadline so as not to disrupt his club's chemistry. This summer he can make some meaningful changes that give the Blue Jackets a solid boost by September's training camp.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Columbus should be pressing for a playoff berth. They nearly corralled one this season, and the confidence that injected into the team could carry over to next season and beyond. As long as the young players can stay on their positive trajectory, there's considerable depth for Columbus to lean on.

April 15: Calgary Flames

Projected cap space: \$36.21 million

2025 draft picks: 1st (FLA), 1st (NJ), 2nd (COL), 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Flames made progress in more ways than one. They went from finishing with 81 points in 2023-24 to challenging for a playoff spot until the final week.

But what might get lost is that they established an identity. Whether it be with their roster, their coaching staff or their front office, change has been a constant with the Flames for the last few seasons. This season saw them attain and then maintain a level of continuity that could see them contend for a playoff spot -- if not make the playoffs -- next season. Dustin Wolf was a revelation in goal, cementing his status as the Flames' No. 1 goalie moving forward, and making a Calder Trophy case.

What went wrong? An offensive disconnect. Normally a lack of goals can be traced back to challenges in several areas. But a look under the hood at their underlying numbers paints a confusing picture.

The Flames were top 10 in shots per 60 minutes, and were 13th in scoring chances per 60. Yet they were in the bottom third when it came to high-danger chances per 60. When combined, those factors led to the Flames finishing with the second-fewest goals per game, and having the NHL's second-worst shooting percentage.

Keys to the offseason: Securing new deals for pending restricted free agents Kevin Bahl, Matt Coronato and Connor Zary is a priority, given what they mean to both the present and future of the Flames.

After those deals are in place, the Flames will still have quite a bit of cap space to address their needs -- perhaps with some more consistent sources of offense? Whatever the front office decides, they must do so with the notion of getting one step closer toward reaching the postseason.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. Whenever teams get this close to a playoff spot without making it, there's an expectation that the following season should include a playoff berth. Some of that will depend upon what happens in the offseason. Not only with the Flames, but with other clubs in a competitive Western Conference where 11 teams will finish with 89 points or more.

April 14: Anaheim Ducks

Projected cap space: \$39.55 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (WPG), 3rd, 3rd (TOR), 4th (DET), 5th, 5th (EDM), 6th, 7th

What went right? The team's young core made progress. Unlike his rookie season, Leo Carlsson wasn't limited to a certain number of games, and the result was a 20-goal season. Goaltender Lukas Dostal won

20 games, and was in the top 20 in save percentage. Cutter Gauthier flirted with a 20-goal season as a rookie. Jackson LaCombe went from 17 points in 71 games in 2023-24 to having 14 goals and 43 points in 70 games, averaging an additional three minutes of ice time. Mason McTavish had his first 20-goal and 50-point season.

Those players are all key building blocks, and all played a role in the Ducks finishing with more than 70 points after consecutive, sub-60-point seasons.

What went wrong? The defensive infrastructure around Dostal. After finishing the 2023-24 season with a minus-91 goal differential, the Ducks needed to be better in the defensive zone in 2024-25. This season, they did cut the differential to minus-34, which speaks to some progress. But their underlying metrics prove there's still more work to be done. Natural Stat Trick's data shows that the Ducks gave up the NHL's most shots per 60 minutes, the most scoring chances per 60 and the most high-danger chances per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Again, it goes back to the young core. Dostal is a pending restricted free agent and is expected to receive a significant increase from his \$812,500 salary. McTavish timed his first 20-goal season well; his entry-level contract ends, meaning he'll also need to sign a new deal this offseason. Securing those contracts should still give the Ducks quite a bit of cap space as they seek to add more help around their core for the next phase.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: In a way, they appear to be on the same path the Utah Hockey Club took in 2024-25. Although the playoffs might not be in reach next season, the Ducks were nearly at a point-per-game pace. Another year of experience for their core -- coupled with what they could do in free agency -- could have them contending for a wild-card spot until next season's final weeks.

April 14: Boston Bruins

Projected cap space: \$27.14 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (CAR), 2nd (STL), 3rd, 4th (PHI), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The best thing Boston did this season was lean all the way into a rebuild. It was inevitable that after a decade of perennial playoff contention the Bruins were going to take a step back -- and take stock. GM Don Sweeney's early coaching change -- from Jim Montgomery to Joe Sacco -- didn't give Boston a boost, and by the trade deadline it was smart for Sweeney to be a big-time seller. The Bruins acquired valuable draft capital -- including four picks in the first and second rounds -- and they added some intriguing new faces such as Casey Mittelstadt and Fraser Minten. Some burgeoning late-season chemistry between David Pastrnak and Morgan Geekie is a nice bonus for the Bruins as a potential pairing to watch.

What went wrong? Boston lost seven of its first 11 games. That was hardly a good omen for what was ahead. The Bruins' calling card has long been its defensive play, so losing top defenseman Hampus Lindholm to a season-ending patella fracture in mid-November was crushing. Montgomery was fired the same week. Jeremy Swayman -- following a contentious contract dispute -- was mediocre in net. And there was little help from the Bruins' offense in making up for any of their defensive and goaltending issues. Boston is 29th in scoring, averaging just 2.63 goals per game, and on the power play (15.5%).

Charlie McAvoy's upper-body injury in early February at the 4 Nations Face-Off was another gut punch. It's no wonder Sweeney keyed on major changes -- such as moving on from captain Brad Marchand -- considering how much these Bruins pale in comparison to what previous teams produced.

Keys to the offseason: The Bruins need a permanent head coach. Sweeney could opt to remove Sacco's interim tag or explore who else is available. Once Sweeney has that person in place, they can start preparing for an important upcoming draft in which Boston will have a high first-round selection and two picks in the second round. Those picks take on a greater meaning now considering the Bruins don't have a deep prospect pool. The focus then shifts to determining which of Boston's young players will be ready to take a leap in the NHL, and how the Bruins will prioritize adding veteran players around them in free agency. The rebuild will be in full swing.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Boston still has a 40-goal scorer in Pastrnak. If Lindholm and McAvoy return to full health, and Swayman can be a game-changer in net again, there's hope for the Bruins to be a fun club to watch -- if not one that reaches the playoffs after a one-year absence. It's not as if they're starting from scratch.

April 14: Buffalo Sabres

Projected cap space: \$22.32 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 4th (MIN), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (NSH), 7th (WSH)

What went right? Buffalo proved this season it is capable of being a playoff team. The Sabres overcame a slow start to hold a postseason slot at Thanksgiving, which is often a good indicator of a club's potential to stay there through the season. Tage Thompson had a terrific season, scoring 44 goals and averaging a point per game; when the Sabres do finally break through, they'll have him in large part to thank for keeping their offensive engine going. Rasmus Dahlin also continues to be a standout with 62 points from the back end.

GM Kevyn Adams was able to trade underperforming Dylan Cozens and added Josh Norris (injured for most of his Sabres' tenure to date) for the future.

What went wrong? The Sabres have failed to qualify for the playoffs in 14 straight seasons. That's tied with the New York Jets for the longest active drought in major professional sports. But Buffalo had its chance. The Sabres were in the mix until a 13-game winless streak through December torpedoed things. And Adams didn't do anything at the trade deadline to make Buffalo better despite its many flaws. The Sabres' collective goaltending was awful, with the league's second-worst save percentage. Buffalo gives up the fourth-most goals per game (3.47) and that's all the more disappointing considering the Sabres are seventh in scoring (3.27).

The Sabres can be their own worst enemy. Ditto with how Buffalo started strong -- with the third-most first period goals -- only to offer up the fourth most in the third period. The Sabres' attention to detail wasn't where it needed to be, and expected growth from players such as Jack Quinn and Zach Benson didn't materialize.

Keys to the offseason: This was Adams' fifth season in Buffalo -- all, obviously, without a playoff appearance. Will ownership keep him on for another kick at that can? It was Adams who installed Lindy Ruff as coach (again) last season, and that alone might keep Adams around. The Sabres have several personnel decisions to make from there. Quinn, JJ Peterka, Bowen Byram, Devon Levi and Ryan McLeod are all restricted free agents. Who will Buffalo retain -- and who winds up without a qualifying offer?

Then it's on to additions from the outside. The Sabres need stronger goaltending next season, and if Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Levi can't provide it as a tandem, then Adams must explore the market for a veteran who can either support one of them or take the reins as a No. 1. That would go a long way in

supporting Buffalo toward consistently being the team it has been of late, winning 10 of 13 through March into April -- when, unfortunately, it was all too little, too late.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Dare we say it? Playoffs. That's where Buffalo absolutely must get. And they have the talent to do it. It's on management to fill in the gaps and get the Sabres out of their historic skid.

April 14: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$29.17 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TOR), 2nd, 2nd (DAL), 3rd, 4th, 4th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? The Seth Jones trade. After Jones told Blackhawks management that he wanted to be moved to a contender, how would they strike a deal for a player with three more years on his contract worth \$9.5 million annually?

Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson found a suitor in the Panthers, and received a 2026 first-round pick and goalie Spencer Knight, while retaining \$2.5 million of Jones' salary each of the remaining seasons. The trade got the Blackhawks their goalie of the present and future in Knight, and provided them with another first-round pick for 2026, extending a streak of multiple first-round picks dating to 2022.

What went wrong? There was only nominal improvement after one of the more aggressive free agency windows of any team last offseason. They had 22 wins through 78 games, and though they trimmed their goal differential from minus-111 in 2023-24 to minus-74, it was still a season of frustration that peaked with the firing of coach Luke Richardson after 26 games, replacing him with interim coach Anders Sorensen.

Keys to the offseason: Does Sorensen get the full-time coaching job, or do the Blackhawks go in another direction? There's also a discussion about what to do with Ryan Donato, who led the team in goals this season. Donato is a pending unrestricted free agent, who is having the best season of his career. The Blackhawks obviously have the cap space, but might it be better spent elsewhere?

Once they have agreed upon new deals for their four-player restricted free agent class that includes Philipp Kurashev and Arvid Soderblom, the Blackhawks could use the remaining money while having one eye on what lies ahead after the 2025-26 season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Next season will be a crucial one, mainly because another season without significant progress could prompt the front office to face bigger questions; after all, the Blackhawks are looking to reach the 70-point plateau for the first time since 2019-20.

So, what does the future look like? Connor Bedard, Frank Nazar and Knight, who are all central to their future plans, are going to be entering the final years of their respective deals. Bedard and Nazar are coming off their entry-level contracts, and Knight would be seeking his third deal -- but his first as a No. 1 goalie.

April 14: Detroit Red Wings

Projected cap space: \$22.98 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 3rd (NYR), 4th (TB), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (STL)

What went right? Detroit showed its tenacity and resilience multiple times this season. The Red Wings overcame a slow start by leaning into a coaching change -- from Derek Lalonde to Todd McLellan -- that ignited the team's December surge into a playoff spot. Detroit fell in and out of contention until February and looked ready to go on a run. Leading that charge was captain Dylan Larkin -- with 29 goals this season -- and Lucas Raymond, who leads Detroit in points with 75. Raymond's development has been especially positive for Detroit and signals how he can continue carrying their offense into the future. The Red Wings also must feel good about being buoyed by a fourth-ranked power play (27.6%).

What went wrong? The Red Wings' defensive play has been a hindrance for years. This season was no exception. Detroit gave up the 12th-most goals against per game (3.14), while ranking 23rd in scoring (2.81). That's a tough combination to overcome. The Red Wings' putrid penalty kill was also worst in the league (69.6%), another indication of their defensive deficiencies.

GM Steve Yzerman didn't do much at the trade deadline to address any of the Red Wings' problems, and Yzerman's continued failure to add impact players in free agency is showing in how Detroit continues to stop short of reaching the playoffs. The Red Wings need consistency, and a strong defensive structure players buy into and can execute. There wasn't enough of it this season to get Detroit out of its nine-year playoff drought.

Keys to the offseason: Yzerman isn't one for making wild moves. But even he must be open to trying something new. There are internal choices to make, including on key RFAs Albert Johansson and Elmer Soderblom, and veterans Patrick Kane and Alex Lyon are both pending UFAs. How drastic Yzerman gets in terms of personnel turnover could foretell where Detroit goes from here.

The Red Wings need more scoring and have been top-heavy in that respect, relying on Larkin, Raymond and Alex DeBrincat for a large chunk of their output. Improving depth there, with proven defense-minded talent, will help the Red Wings keep up with their Atlantic rivals. Generally boosting the blue line wouldn't hurt, either.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Detroit has playoff potential. They've shown it repeatedly. The Red Wings' goal going into next season should be as contenders for the postseason. The question is whether Yzerman provides Detroit with more resources to get there.

April 14: Nashville Predators

Projected cap space: \$17.26 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TB), 1st (VGK), 2nd, 2nd (TB), 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (COL)

What went right? Their prospects. Of note, Matthew Wood averaged more than a point per game at the University of Minnesota before signing a professional contract. Joey Willis went from scoring 29 goals in his first two OHL seasons combined to having 27 goals this season. At the NHL level, Justin Barron, Zachary L'Heureux and Fedor Svechikov had expanded ice time.

What went wrong? Everything else. They went from being a playoff team that spent big in free agency to get Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault, Brady Skjei and Luke Schenn to having the third-worst record in the NHL. They were consistently disconnected. They are sixth in shots per game, but last in goals per game. They have one of the top 10 penalty kills yet gave up the seventh-most goals per game.

Keys to the offseason: With three first-round picks and more than \$17 million in cap space, the Preds have options -- especially if their first-round pick becomes the No. 1 pick via the draft lottery. But the Predators are trying to find a way that allows them to win now and in the future. It's why they began

shifting course toward playing young players after a poor start to the season. Now it's all about strengthening that plan as they seek to recover from one of the more trying seasons in franchise history.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Preds can go in a number of directions. They entered the 2023-24 season as a team on the rise and made the playoffs. They entered 2024-25 as a team that could be in the conference finals discussion before ending up in the lottery. If they aren't in the playoff mix next spring, there will be some big questions for the front office to answer.

April 14: New York Islanders

Projected cap space: \$28.90 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Islanders showed determination by putting themselves into a contending position this season, particularly during an 11-3-0 run through January ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off break. They benefited from some terrific individual performances along the way, most notably from Bo Horvat (with a team-leading 54 points) and Anders Lee (pacing New York with 28 goals).

Noah Dobson continued to show why he's one of the league's burgeoning stars on the back end and Alexander Romanov appears increasingly comfortable in his role. GM Lou Lamoriello also deserves credit for the tidy trade of Brock Nelson, which primarily netted New York (among other things) a first-round pick in 2026 NHL draft and promising prospect in Calum Ritchie.

What went wrong? The Islanders failed to truly excel in any category. They're 25th in the scoring (averaging 2.77 goals per game) and gave up the 13th-most goals against (3.14), with a putrid, 31st-ranked power play (13.1%) and equally awful penalty kill (72.0%). Losing Mathew Barzal to injury for all but 30 games this season certainly took its toll in basically every respect. Starting goaltender Ilya Sorokin has been fine (with a .905 save percentage) but hardly the spectacular figure he was in helping New York reach the playoffs in recent seasons.

The Islanders didn't have enough difference-makers, and Lamoriello did not bring anyone on board before the trade deadline. In fact, Lamoriello held onto guys such as Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Kyle Palmieri -- a pending UFA -- and seemingly missed out on a chance to add draft assets for a much-needed overhaul. By the time head coach Patrick Roy was publicly calling out forward Anthony Duclair and subsequently seeing Duclair take a leave of absence from the team, it was clear how tensions were boiling over.

Keys to the offseason: New York must at least consider taking a big swing. But is Lamoriello going to do that? The Islanders should have about \$28 million in cap space to use for next season, and they've got a couple of high draft picks. It's time to decide though what direction the franchise is headed. Can Lamoriello steer this group back to contending status? Or is a rebuild on deck?

There are also critical personnel decisions to make. The Islanders have a large collection of pending RFAs, including Dobson, Romanov, Scott Perunovich, and Adam Boqvist. Who New York keeps will have a major impact on their blue line. The Islanders again need to address their scoring depth. Barzal's absence absolutely hurt New York. Shoring up the offense so it can withstand injury will go a long way. But step one is getting honest about where the organization is right now, and whether they keep pushing to compete in the Metro or take a step back and retool.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Islanders sputtered this season after making consecutive playoff appearances -- both with first-round exits. Unless there's some significant changes in the offseason, one-and-done in the postseason is about as good as New York can expect.

April 14: New York Rangers

Projected cap space: \$9.67 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd (SEA), 4th (ANA), 4th (COL), 5th (MIN), 6th, 6th (SEA), 7th

What went right? New York didn't need any added distractions this season, so the fact GM Chris Drury was able to offload underperforming former captain Jacob Trouba early was a shrewd move and kept the Rangers from dwelling on that particular problem all season. The Kaapo Kakko trade was a necessary swap as well that was swiftly handled. And bringing on J.T. Miller was, at least, an attempt to give New York a needed boost up front.

Meanwhile, New York saw growth from some of its young players, especially Will Cuyll (with a career-high 20 goals and 43 points this season). Artemi Panarin has done his part to lead the Rangers on offense (37 goals and 87 points) and Adam Fox anchored the blue line with trademark efficiency.

What went wrong? Oh boy. Are the Rangers this season's biggest disappointment? It's hard to argue otherwise. Last season's Presidents' Trophy winners are a shadow of their former (114-point) selves. All the previous characteristics New York displayed as regular-season champions evaporated. The Rangers lacked consistency (they haven't won three games in a row since November), veteran contributions (Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider have been particularly lackluster), a functional power play (ranked 27th at 17.6%) and failed time and again to show any sort of resiliency (they have won five games all season when trailing by one in the third period).

The lack of urgency and determination that elevated New York teams of the past has been missing. But why? Was it the rumored locker room issues? Has coach Peter Laviolette's message been falling on deaf ears? Whatever the reason, New York never truly put its game together. To be officially eliminated from the postseason in a dispiriting 7-3 loss to Carolina on Saturday was a fitting salvo in a lost season.

Keys to the offseason: Can Laviolette survive to coach another season? That's question No. 1 -- and a bafflingly one to even be considering given he led the Rangers to their best regular season the season before. But it seems inevitable New York is going to make drastic changes after this clunker of a season.

Next, Drury must assess this Rangers' core and figure out who to build around, and who to move out. The way Kreider and Zibanejad have struggled could lead Drury to find them new homes. And New York's blue line is probably in need of a redo given the Rangers gave up the 14th-most goals against (3.10) and that's with one of the league's better goalie tandems in Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick. It's not as if New York has to tear it all down. Drury must identify where the biggest leaks this season came from and do what's necessary to patch the holes.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New York can easily be a playoff team again next season. But it will require some form of change. To stand pat would send the wrong message about how poorly the Rangers performed this season. A chip on the shoulder will help New York get back to its potential.

April 14: Philadelphia Flyers

Projected cap space: \$25.64 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (COL), 1st (EDM), 2nd, 2nd (ANA), 2nd (CGY), 2nd (CBJ), 3rd, 5th, 5th (CAR), 6th

What went right? Philadelphia had its moments. The arrival of Matvei Michkov signaled the start of a new era for the Flyers in which Michkov -- a 20-year-old dynamo leading all NHL rookies with 24 goals -- has seemingly unlimited potential to drive their offense into the future. And Philadelphia has other young players -- such as last year's No. 13 pick Jett Luchanko -- to be excited about too after his brief NHL audition.

The Flyers' old guard wasn't all bad, either. Travis Konecny had another strong season with a career high in points ahead of his long-term extension starting next season. Ultimately, Philadelphia can't stay in a rebuild mode forever and it was positive to see GM Danny Briere actually make some moves -- such as trading Joel Farabee and Scott Laughton and firing coach John Tortorella -- to help kick-start Philadelphia into 2025-26.

What went wrong? The Flyers were too big a mess in too many key categories. Philadelphia's collection of goaltenders produced a woeful .888 save percentage at even strength, the worst recorded by a team since 2009-10. Samuel Ersson wasn't the reliable No. 1 the Flyers needed, and it showed too often in how games slipped away. Philadelphia's putrid power play was another problem -- 30th in the league (14.9%) -- and a 24th-ranked offense hasn't been much help. By the time Philadelphia had lost 11 of 12 through mid-March, it was no surprise Tortorella was gone. Something is clearly still missing in Philadelphia.

Keys to the offseason: First, Philadelphia needs a head coach. Briere will decide quickly whether that's via removing the interim tag from Brad Shaw or a new addition. There's much work to be done with the next permanent bench boss in place.

Philadelphia absolutely must capitalize in the draft. They hold three first-round picks and four second-round choices. There's a chance if the Flyers draft high enough that one of those first-rounders steps into their lineup at some point next season. Briere must be smart in how he cashes in on that capital. Then it's all about development. Philadelphia doesn't project to be overly active in free agency given the amount of talent it already has in the NHL and waiting in the wings. What the Flyers need are for those players to take steps forward so when training camp comes around there is serious competition for spots, and it sets up Philadelphia for a competitive season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: This is the fifth consecutive season Philadelphia has missed the postseason. The Flyers must at least challenge well into April for a spot next season. Briere has been patient with this group continuing to grow and it's about time those investments paid dividends.

April 14: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected cap space: \$24.58 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (NYR), 2nd (WSH), 3rd, 3rd (MIN), 3rd (OTT), 4th, 5th (CHI), 5th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? Pittsburgh can always count on Sidney Crosby to breathe some sort of life into their season, and the captain delivered again with a 30-goal campaign that suggests the 37-year-old isn't slowing down. And that's a great thing -- because the Penguins' recent youth movement might signal brighter days ahead. GM Kyle Dubas brought up Rutger McGroarty -- acquired via trade earlier this season -- and Ville Koivunen to get Pittsburgh's next wave ready with some NHL experience. Smart

decision. The Penguins needed to end the season on a high note, and showcasing what the franchise has coming seemed invigorating for old and new skaters alike.

What went wrong? It was death by a thousand cuts in Pittsburgh. The Penguins don't have the depth to compete with other Eastern Conference powerhouses -- outside of their top line (with Crosby, Rickard Rakell and Bryan Rust mostly), there wasn't enough consistent scoring. Even Evgeni Malkin struggled with only 15 goals this season.

That dearth of scoring issue was amplified by the Penguins' problems keeping pucks out of their net. Tristan Jarry flamed out as the team's expected No. 1 goaltender, being demoted to the AHL along with his 3.31 goals-against average and .884 save percentage through mid-January. To be fair, Jarry (and the Penguins other netminders) got no help from a leaky blue line that surrounded the second-most goals per game (3.58) this season. It would have challenged Pittsburgh to overcome its issues in only one phase of the game, let alone all three.

Keys to the offseason: Pittsburgh doesn't appear close to firing coach Mike Sullivan, so that allows the Penguins to hit the ground running again in figuring out how to capitalize on its youth movement. McGroarty and Koivunen will be counted on to compete for slots in training camp.

Then it's on Dubas to address the Penguins' lack of scoring with some strategic veteran additions. The market should play out in Pittsburgh's favor there -- and offering the incentive of potentially skating alongside Crosby never hurts in a negotiation. And the Penguins' defense? It can't stand as is. If Dubas is still trying to avoid a full-scale rebuild, then it's crucial to use this offseason to find roster balance between the Penguins' present and future additions. Some degree of outside help is required to make that happen.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: It's not reasonable to say Pittsburgh makes it back to the playoffs -- unless there are some key changes. If the Penguins rightly address their leaks, then there's talent enough to put Pittsburgh back as a playoff contender. But that's a mighty large question as this season comes to a close.

April 14: San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$42.19 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (DAL), 2nd, 2nd (OTT), 3rd (COL), 4th (STL), 4th (WPG), 5th (COL), 7th (NJ)

What went right? The blueprint for the future. Star rookie center Macklin Celebrini leads the team in points, and fellow star rookie forward Will Smith is fifth. They used the trade deadline to add a pair of first-round picks; they'll have two first-rounders in 2025 and again in 2026, continuing a trend since 2023. Even though they're going to finish with the NHL's worst record for a consecutive season, the Sharks have already shown some sense of improvement given they went from a minus-150 goal difference to minus-98 entering the final week of the regular season.

What went wrong? Well, there was quite a bit. But that's to be expected whenever a team is in the midst of a rebuild.

The Sharks were in the bottom 10 in goals per game, the power play, scoring chances per 60 minutes, shots per 60 and high-danger chances per 60, which explains their offensive struggles. On defense, they gave up the most goals per game, had the worst penalty kill, and were in the bottom 10 in most scoring chances allowed per 60, most shots allowed per 60 and most high-danger chances allowed per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Do they get the No. 1 pick for a consecutive year? Or will it be No. 2 or No. 3? Whatever happens, this will be the third straight draft cycle and the fourth time in the past five in which the Sharks have a lottery pick. Picking that high along with having a second first-round pick will certainly advance their rebuild.

Then there's the fact they'll have more than \$42 million in cap space, which can be used to address their roster -- with the caveat that the Sharks might not be major players in free agency for at least a few more years.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Continuing to watch the progress made by Yaroslav Askarov, William Eklund, Celebrini and Smith, among others, is going to be the priority. The Sharks will seek to make more improvements while further developing those franchise cornerstones in Ryan Warsofsky's second year behind the bench. But there's also a possibility the Sharks could either sign players in free agency or move on from players on their current roster ahead of the deadline to add even more draft capital for their future plans.

April 14: Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$21.75 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (TOR), 4th, 4th (DAL), 5th, 7th

What went right? All three of the trades they made this season. Moving on from Will Borgen led to them getting a one-time No. 2 overall pick in Kaapo Kakko, plus draft capital. At the trade deadline, they acquired a pair of first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 in exchange for Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde. Parting ways with Brandon Tanev netted them a second-round pick in the 2027 draft. Kakko has 10 goals and 29 points in 46 games for the Kraken as part of a season in which he set a career high with 43 points.

What went wrong? Between their underlying defensive metrics and the fact they sent Philipp Grubauer to the AHL? It wasn't the most consistent season for the Kraken when it came to goal prevention. Having a new coaching staff included the departure of assistant coach Jay Leach, who played a crucial role in the Kraken's defensive identity. This season, they were in the bottom 10 in shots allowed per 60 minutes, scoring chances allowed per 60 and high-danger chances allowed per 60. The underperformance from Grubauer didn't help, and in fact, Joey Daccord (who began as the backup) was one of their more consistent performers.

Keys to the offseason: Dan Bylsma's coaching staff helped pull the Kraken from the bottom five in goals per game in 2023-24 to being around league average this season. Could they find a defensive version of that solution heading into 2025-26, with the idea that it might provide the Kraken with the consistency that has eluded them as a franchise? That is one of the most significant questions facing the Kraken now that they have missed the playoffs in three of their first four seasons.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Kraken must be in contention for a wild-card spot (at minimum), or there will be some big questions to answer for the front office at this time next year.

April 14: Utah Hockey Club

Projected cap space: \$21.53 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th

What went right? Quite a bit. The trade during draft weekend for franchise defenseman Mikhail Sergachev set the stage for a season in which the franchise made real strides. Before moving to Salt Lake City, the Arizona Coyotes had one 80-point season since 2014-15. The Utah Hockey Club had 84 points with four games left. The team was still fighting for a playoff berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season, which was another step forward for the core -- and proves that bigger things could be on the horizon.

What went wrong? Overtime and shootouts. Entering the final two weeks of the regular season, only the Flames and Canucks had more overtime losses than Utah, two teams that were also chasing a Western Conference wild-card spot. But losing those 12 games in overtime or a shootout demonstrates how Utah was close in many games. If it can get on the winning end of those extra-time coin flips next season, the results will be different too.

Keys to the offseason: Remember how the Coyotes were hamstrung by a need to be miserly with cap space? The Utah Hockey Club doesn't have that issue. That much was made clear last offseason when GM Bill Armstrong invested \$22 million for each of the next two seasons in bolstering the defensive unit. Utah will have more than \$21 million in space this summer, which is enough to improve a roster that could seriously challenge for a playoff spot. A top priority? Improving an offense that was 21st in goals per game, with a power play that was 15th.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. It's really that simple. Utah has a core that has gone through its growing pains. It's a group that has shown it can make progress from one year to the next. Nearly the entire roster is either under contract or team control for next season, and the front office has enough cap space to add the sort of players who could help clinch a playoff berth in the club's second season in Salt Lake.

April 14: Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$15.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd (SJ), 4th (OTT), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Despite all the inconsistencies, the numerous injuries to key players, and the J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson friction, the Canucks were still in the hunt for a wild-card berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season. Yes, there were those who had strong individual seasons, including reigning Norris Trophy winner Quinn Hughes and Pius Suter, who had his first 20-goal effort and more than 40 points. But those performances could only get the Canucks so far, in a season in which they will miss the playoffs after winning their division and coming within a game of the conference finals a year earlier.

What went wrong? All those inconsistencies, those numerous injuries and the Miller-Pettersson friction.

One detail that speaks to those inconsistencies is that the Canucks were among the top five in the NHL in terms of fewest shots allowed per 60 minutes and scoring chances allowed per 60 -- and yet were 19th in goals allowed per game. It's what made the need for scoring depth even more crucial. This became more evident in the wake of trading Miller to the Rangers and trying to find ways to replace a forward with three consecutive seasons of more than 80 points.

Keys to the offseason: What happens to head coach Rick Tocchet? Does he stay on his one-year option as a bridge to a longer-term contract? Or could he be swayed to leave, which would then leave the Canucks searching for a fourth coach since 2020?

After the coaching situation is resolved, what happens to Brock Boeser? A six-time 20-goal scorer, he's a pending UFA who could command a significant payday should he reach the open market. Do the Canucks ink him to a long-term deal?

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Add the Canucks to the list of teams whose situation could become clearer once free agency ends. They have most of their team either under contract or team control for next season. But two of their three leading goal scorers -- Boeser and Suter -- are pending UFAs, whereas there is also uncertainty surrounding Tocchet.

Getting those questions answered along with addressing their other concerns could provide a stronger grasp for how the Canucks navigate next season. But a return to the postseason is certainly within grasp.

The Athletic / Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes, Zach Werenski named NHL Norris Trophy finalists — will Makar win his second?

By Rob Rossi - April 29, 2025

Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche, Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks and Zach Werenski of the Columbus Blue Jackets were named finalists for the NHL's Norris Trophy on Tuesday, awarded annually "to the defensive player who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-around ability in the position."

Makar is favored to win for the second time.

His 30 goals, 62 assists and 90 points this season were the most among all defensemen. He finished ninth in league scoring. A finalist every season during this decade, Makar finished third in voting the last two seasons after winning the Norris in 2022. He was a runner-up the year before.

Makar's 30-goal season was only the 18th in league history. He is one of nine defensemen ever to score at least 30 goals in a season, and the first since the Washington Capitals' Mike Green in 2008-09. Only five defensemen have scored at least 30 goals and not won the Norris Trophy for that season.

During the season's first few months, a historic race appeared to be shaping up between Makar and Hughes. However, a series of injuries limited Hughes around midseason, causing him to miss the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament. Still, he finished with 16 goals and 78 points in 62 games — a 1.12 points-per-game average that was not far from Makar's leading 1.16 for defensemen.

Werenski's 23 goals and 82 points were second to Makar in each category among defensemen. A foundational player for the Blue Jackets, Werenski averaged the most ice time at 26 minutes, 45 seconds. Had the Blue Jackets made the playoffs, Werenski's candidacy might have rivaled that of Makar. NHL awards are voted upon, leaving open the possibility that a sentimental favorite could emerge as a winner over a candidate with superior statistics. If that happened this year, Werenski likely would be that candidate.

Select members of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association vote on the Norris Trophy. Finalists for the Vezina Trophy, voted on by league GMs, were announced Monday. The Ted Lindsay Award (most outstanding player) will have its finalists revealed Wednesday, followed by the Hart Trophy (league MVP) on Thursday and the Masterton (perseverance and dedication), Selke (best defensive forward), Jack Adams (coach of the year) and Lady Byng (sportsmanship) awards on Friday.