



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
October 10, 2024**

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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets on dire projections: 'We're not feeling sorry for ourselves'

By Brian Hedger – October 10, 2024

There is one place where optimism about the Blue Jackets still exists. Outside their locker room, however, it's nowhere to be found.

Just like in the past four years, there isn't a single NHL analyst or media outlet bold enough to forecast the Blue Jackets anywhere but finishing last in the Metropolitan Division. No projections exist saying they'll place anywhere but the bottom of the league's standings and again near the top of the NHL draft.

Patrik Laine was traded to the Montreal Canadiens per the Finnish forward's request. Johnny Gaudreau was killed one week later. Captain Boone Jenner and power Dmitry Voronkov sustained upper-body injuries within 14 hours of each other last week that are suspected of being shoulder issues that will keep both out long-term.

Jenner is seeking a second opinion and may need surgery, while Voronkov might return around the end of November. Either way, both going down before the regular season starts has done nothing for the Blue Jackets' projectability among those with high-powered calculators.

The consensus on what kind of season is coming to Columbus says the Blue Jackets don't have a sliver of hope. Try telling that to players before a single puck has dropped in their regular season. Numbers analysis and predictions are murky for the Blue Jackets, but it's not something they're concerned about.

"We're not feeling sorry for ourselves," Blue Jackets center Sean Kuraly said. "It's just like, 'These are the cards we've been dealt,' and sometimes your hand isn't as good. We're not going to blame the dealer on a (bad) hand. We're going to keep going, make the best of it and that's really it.

"If we feel bad for ourselves, we're not doing anyone who's cheering for us any favors, which includes John and the Gaudreau (family). That takes precedence over anything else."

Analysts predict another miserable season for Columbus Blue Jackets

It's a good thing new Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason isn't on social media or read NHL season preview articles. It's probably better for his blood pressure readings.

The Athletic, for example, projects the Blue Jackets to finish with 69 points. Its writers give the Blue Jackets an 80% chance to finish last in the Metro (eighth), a 15% chance to finish seventh, 4% chance to finish sixth, 1% chance to finish fifth and 0% chance of finishing any higher, let alone qualifying for the playoffs.

"Barring some incredible jumps from several of the team's young players, the chances of Columbus being competitive on a nightly basis aren't high," the publication's breakdown of the Blue Jackets said. "New coach Dean Evason will likely give the team a bump in the right direction, one that's not accounted for here, but this roster can only go so far with the talent it has on paper."

The Hockey News' projection was just as gloomy. After a breakdown section explaining why the Blue Jackets will be awful, there was a chance to reverse course in a different section titled: "Why I could be wrong."

The Hockey News projects the Jackets to finish eighth in the Metro with zero chance of competing for a playoff spot.

“Even with newcomers Sean Monahan, James van Riemsdyk and Jordan Harris providing a spark of new blood in Columbus, the notion that this lineup will consistently win enough to prove us wrong is a stretch,” it reads. “While Columbus can take some solace in getting another high draft pick next summer, there’s no question it’s going to be a difficult season in many regards.”

That was before Voronkov and Jenner were injured.

At ESPN, the Blue Jackets are expected to finish 31st overall with no hope of competing for the playoffs. All eight Daily Faceoff writers ranked Columbus last in the Metro. Sporting News mirrors the other.

It isn’t pretty.

“You can use motivation in different ways, whether it’s a contract or what people say about you or your family,” defenseman Zach Werenski said. “There are different ways to get motivated to play hockey and win games. I think for our group, when people tell us that we’re not going to do something or we’re going to finish last, it puts a sour taste in your mouth. You want to go out there and prove ‘em wrong ... right?”

Columbus Blue Jackets excited for new NHL season

They might not wallow in self-pity, but the Blue Jackets aren’t oblivious either.

“We’re not ignoring the fact that we just lost our captain and best player (in Jenner),” Kuraly said. “This is the reality now. It’s our reality. We know it, so how the hell do we make the best of this thing? We fight, we move forward, and we take it one day at a time.”

Clichè? Definitely. It’s also a wise approach.

“If you look at all 82 games, it gets overwhelming,” Kuraly said. “I think you’re going to see a team this season that’s going to be really short-sighted. It’s going to be one period at a time, one shift at a time. That’s the only manageable way to think about this season as whole. It’s just one step at a time.”

Evason wants something else to develop, too, win or lose.

“Do we want to play with confidence, do we want to play hard every night ... do we want teams to know that when they play against us, it’s going to be a difficult game?” he said. “If that’s what having a ‘chip on your shoulder’ means, then yeah, that’s what we want to do. You can’t just throw your sticks out and play against the Columbus Blue Jackets. That’s the group we want.”

If that group also draws motivation from proving its many doubters wrong, that works too.

“In a sense, I keep receipts,” Werenski said. “If we play well, and have the year we want, then in a way it’ll be like, ‘Well, what do you know now?’ That’s just generally speaking. They could be right. We could finish (last), but why not have the mentality that we’re going to prove everyone wrong? It’s a funny time of year with all these projections on where teams are going to finish, because it’s never totally correct. Hopefully, we’re one of the teams that breaks those this year and does our own thing.”

Columbus Dispatch / NHL writer sorry for claiming death of Johnny Gaudreau helps Blue Jackets in draft lottery

By Lori Schmidt – October 10, 2024

Hockey writer Frank Seravalli is apologizing for what he calls a "poor choice of words" regarding the death of Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau.

The president of the Professional Hockey Writers Association and insider for The Daily Faceoff wrote in a series of preseason predictions that: "With a little help from Gaudreau, the Columbus Blue Jackets will win the 2025 Draft Lottery. It's the only consolation prize on a brutal year."

Seravalli had linked to the story on social media promising to make a fool of himself, although this was undoubtedly not what he had in mind.

Naturally, the implication that Gaudreau's death had any upside upset many hockey fans and Seravalli edited the piece twice, eventually striking the offending line entirely. It now reads: "The Columbus Blue Jackets will win the 2025 Draft Lottery. It's the only consolation prize on a brutal year, but hope and help is on the way. Bananas that the Blue Jackets have never won the Lottery."

The story also includes an editor's note that argues the remark's original intent had been to honor Gaudreau's impact, not offend.

Editor's note: ... A prediction about the Columbus Blue Jackets winning the draft lottery, has been amended to remove a comment about the late Johnny Gaudreau looking down on the team from heaven. The intent was to honor Gaudreau and not offend. The wording was chosen poorly. Daily Faceoff regrets the error and apologizes to anyone hurt by the comment.

Seravalli, a former Philadelphia Inquirer reporter, additionally issued a personal apology saying, "Especially as a member of the Philly hockey community, I've been absolutely gutted by John and Matty's passing - like so many around the hockey world. This tragedy is a difficult topic we're all grappling with and what I wrote was never intended to add to that."

Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew died after they were struck by a man who has since been charged with drunk driving. The brothers were bicycling in Oldmans Township, New Jersey, close to their hometown in Salem County, at the time.

[The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Dean Evason goes deep on his background — and his appreciation for live theater](#)

By Aaron Portzline – October 10, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It was clear to the Columbus Blue Jackets one year ago that what the dressing room needed — what the veteran players were craving — was a veteran coach who could command respect and hold players, young and old, accountable.

It took new GM Don Waddell longer than expected, but he landed in late June on Dean Evason, who was fired by the Minnesota Wild in the middle of last season and had a long track record in the Western Hockey League and American Hockey League in addition to nine seasons as an NHL assistant.

Evason has barely had a break since taking the job so deep into summer, but he took time to continue what has now become an annual rite this time of season. He sat down with The Athletic this week for a lengthy Q&A that touched on many subjects, from his love of Broadway plays, his deep respect and love for his 86-year-old mother, to why he feels Columbus is the right spot at the right time for him.

You think you know Evason's type? The hockey lifer who had an 803-game career in the NHL before going into coaching? Well, think again. Evason is as tough and as driven as you'd expect, but he's also a bit of a renaissance man. Here are the highlights of our conversation.

So let's go through Dean Evason's childhood in the Great North. Born in Flin Flon, Manitoba, correct?

Yep, born in Flin Flon, Manitoba. Moved to Thompson (Manitoba) when I was 2 and lived there until I was 9 or 10. Then we moved to Winnipeg until I was 15 and then on to Brandon.

What kept you moving?

My dad worked for a company called Powell Equipment. It was Caterpillar Tractors and big, heavy machinery. It was a rental and sales business, and he worked in the parts department. That's why we bounced. They opened a store in Brandon, so we moved there. My dad has passed. My mom (Sheila) still lives in Brandon. She was a librarian at the hospital, and before that a telephone operator, so she has some fond stories. She's 86 years old, but in very good health. Still full of piss and vinegar, as tough a lady as you'll meet. She'll be at the opener in St. Paul, and then she and my wife (Genevieve) are going to come to Columbus for the home opener.

Did a little work here. As a point of reference for U.S. readers, Winnipeg is about seven hours north of Minneapolis, and Thompson is about seven hours north of Winnipeg. If you drive that far west of Minnesota, you hit Yellowstone National Park. That, Dean, is an entirely different lifestyle and climate, right?

It is, yes. There were times we couldn't go out for recess because there were polar bears in the garbage, or because it was so cold. I remember the snow piles on the playground being so high ... my mom had to come into school one day, because my little gang used to fight another guy's gang in a king-of-the-hill type game. It was so cold, but we didn't know any different.

I'm guessing lots of outdoor hockey.

We rarely got to play indoors, usually only in tournaments. My dad built a rink in our backyard, so we'd skate after school until dinner and then after dinner until bedtime. There was a kid down the road whose parents built an actual(-size) hockey rink. You remember the old potato sacks, the burlap? They

sewed so many of those together they made a roof out of it. It was like an arena to us. My brother (Dan) and I got good enough that we weren't allowed to come over and play anymore.

Your brother was only one year older than you. Did you ever play together competitively?

We did. My brother was 16, I was 15, and we played on the same team in Brandon. Ron Hextall was our goalie. We won the Manitoba championship and went on to Cornwall, Ontario, to play in the Air Canada Cup.

Does it feel like you live in the South now?

Yeah. I golfed (Sunday) and it was 80 degrees in October. I am south, for sure. The leaves are gone in Thompson, Manitoba, that's for sure. I consider this down south for sure.

Initial thoughts on Columbus? You've settled into a downtown condominium, right?

Yes. Love it. I'm surprised by how quaint it feels, but how many venues and restaurants and shops there are. I ride my bike around town a lot, and campus (Ohio State University) is just up the road. I do hot yoga at a place just off High St., daily if I can. I love this area. It's quaint, but large. A small big city is a good way to put it.

Did you have any concept of what would be here beyond what your job was going to be?

Nope. And I haven't had a ton of time to really dig in yet. I did look at the local theater companies, because I love that stuff, and I usually will load the app on my phone and just start going to shows. We'll get there. But it's been a pretty intense start, as you know.

You walked me right into a topic I'm excited to get to: Your love of live theater. How did that start? And tell me what you love about it.

My middle daughter (Brienne) is very artsy. She graduated as a dance major, business minor. We started watching a lot of her productions and really enjoyed them. If I read a book, it has to be non-fiction. If I'm going to something, it has to be a live event. I don't like movies that aren't real. I lived in Hartford when I played (for the Whalers), and I went to New York when I was 21 or 22 to see a Broadway play, and it captivated me.

Speaking for myself, I get really emotional. I don't mean sad, just moved. The level of talent on Broadway is just incredible.

Last year, I went to four plays in two days. I went to a matinee and an evening show both days. My wife loves it, too, so Genevieve and I will go every year at least once. I'm a big Yankees fan as well, so we'll do that and then see a play. I agree with you on the emotions. A hundred percent. There's so many times when even if it's happy, I'm just sitting there bawling, and I'm like "What the hell?" I'll pay a little extra for a really good seat, and it just blows you away how hard they're working. The talent is incredible, the singing and the acting.

Do you imagine being an actor in that capacity is similar to being a pro athlete?

Hundred percent. I completely agree. I talk about being in the arena, on the stage, all the time. Being a former player, you don't notice the people, the noise, anything. You're just zoned in, and that's what you do as a performer. We're all in the entertainment business. It's a gift to be able to do that.

Let's get into the hockey. Does the style of play you coach — up on the toes, taking away space, fast-paced, pretty confrontational — is that a reflection of your style as a player?

Yeah, I think that's fair. People talk about how the team takes on your personality as a coach, and that's just a natural thing. In my case, it's not entirely how I played, but how I wanted to play. Not offensive or

defensive, but just a well-rounded and hard-to-play-against hockey club. A gritty, determined style of play. If you asked people how I played, they'd say I played that way. I'd want to coach a lot more skill into our team (laughs) than I had.

Does this team have the wherewithal to play that way?

Yeah, I think so. When I got here, everybody talked about our young skill. Well, I think we have a well-balanced group of veterans, young players, size and skill. If you just talk about young, talented players, it's exciting that you can push them to play a certain way to combined with that skill set. Look at Fantilli. We want him to play aggressive, in-your-face, finish your check, get up the ice, put pressure on teams to make mistakes. If he does that, with his skill set to be a scorer, you've got a well-rounded player. We're pushing all of them to play as aggressive as they can.

You went to the Ohio State-Iowa game at Ohio Stadium on Saturday, the place in March where you'll play Detroit in the outdoor game. Were you envisioning how that's going to be?

The coaches sat in one section, the players in another. We went down to the field at halftime, but then after that, we all got spread apart. I went back to the seats and sat there alone, and, of course, nobody knew who I was, so there was nobody to talk to. I did spend some time kind of visualizing where we'd be playing, where we'd come in, all that stuff, and then you look up and it's the massive building!

One hundred thousand plus.

I've said this before and people probably think I'm crazy. I've been to Rome, and I've been to the Colosseum. When I was standing outside looking up ... I'm not saying it's the same thing, but there's a comparison. It's a massive building. It's going to be an absolute thrill to play a game in there. Just a thrill.

What have you learned about this group of players you're coaching?

This is a close group. That has had a lot of turmoil the last two-three years. We've already seen with some stability, some structure that Don (Waddell) has put into place and I and the other coaches have put into place, how tight we are as a group. It's allowed the players to become even closer. I think that's my biggest asset, and I've been told that I have an ability to bring staffs and players closer. That's what I believe in. I don't believe in individual anything. It's all gotta be team first. And I know the players see that. When we go into the room, we're chirping and joking around, and they know we're going to have each others' backs.

Not long after you were hired, before you really got to know some of these players, tragedy struck, the death of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. There's no guidance for coaches in how to handle a situation like this. Did you reach out to anybody to help you navigate the early stages of that?

Without getting too personal, I lost my brother (Dan "Heavy" Evason) when he was 42 years old. He passed away on the ice. Finished a shift, went to the bench, and had a massive heart attack. I was coaching in the WHL (Vancouver) at the time. My mom called me when I was about to go into the pregame meeting. She told me, and asked, 'What do you want to do?' I told her I was coaching the game, for sure, and we ended up winning in overtime. Just after the game, the floodgates opened and the emotions hit.

As I get older, I find myself looking at people older than I am with a certain amount of appreciation, just knowing that they've almost certainly been through a lot of tough stuff. Do you feel that way?

Oh, absolutely. I have an incredible teacher in my mother, who lives her life one day at a time. I have a tattoo — well, I have a lot of tattoos — but I have one that's in her handwriting right beside my heart that says, "One Day At A Time." That's how I live; that's how she lives. She's not afraid to talk about

dying. She's proud to talk about the wonderful life she's had, and she's known plenty of hardship and hard times. She's had two children that have passed away. I had another brother that died of crib death. She has endured losses, but she has the most incredible attitude, a positive attitude. I've leaned on her over many years now.

Does this feel like the right time, the right place, the right situation for Dean Evason?

It does. And, honestly, it has since Day 1. It's felt right. It's felt like home. It's felt like this is where I'm supposed to be. And I'll be honest with you, this isn't a job for me. It's a passion. This is what I've always wanted to do. It's the closest thing to being a player. I dreamt of playing. Now I dream of winning the Stanley Cup as a coach. It definitely feels right.

[BlueJackets.com / Mears excited to hit the airwaves with the Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 10, 2024

On Nov. 17, 2000, Steve Mears hopped in his car and made the drive from northwest Ohio to the state capital.

Then a student broadcaster at Bowling Green State University, he traversed Interstate 75 and state route 23 through rural Ohio on a chilly, overcast day and then drove into downtown Columbus to watch the 20th game in Blue Jackets history from section 215.

And he did it with a dream in mind.

“I distinctly remember looking up over my left shoulder and looking at the broadcast booth,” Mears said. “I did that all the time if I was at any NHL game. I used to always peer up at the broadcast booth and just dream of being there once.

“If you told 19-year-old Steve at Bowling Green that he’d get a chance to call Blue Jackets games somewhere down the road, even if it was just one game, it would have been the ultimate fantasy camp for me. Now to follow the journey of this team and live in such a wonderful community, it’s almost surreal.”

It’s fair now to say Mears has come full circle. Tomorrow night when the Blue Jackets begin the season at Minnesota, Mears will be in the broadcast booth alongside analyst Jody Shelley as the new television voice of the team on Bally Sports Ohio.

When Mears interviewed for the job this summer, he put the ticket stub from that 2000 game against the Florida Panthers in his jacket pocket for good luck. It’s one of a number of coincidences – or perhaps signs – that Mears was meant for the job.

Another? As Mears was staring up at Nationwide Arena’s press row that Saturday night 24 years ago, the man he’s replacing in Columbus, Jeff Rimer, was there that night working for the Panthers.

It is a task to fill the shoes of the man who spent 20 years calling Blue Jackets games, but Mears is ready. Most recently the radio voice of the Pittsburgh Penguins – more on that in a second – Mears comes to Columbus with more than two decades of experience calling hockey games dating back to his time at the Slater Family Ice Rink in Bowling Green.

Originally from Murrysville, east of Pittsburgh, he grew up enjoying all sports, but hockey is the one closest to his heart.

“Growing up in Western Pennsylvania, I fell in love with the sport right away,” Mears said. “I love all the other sports, but hockey is my first love. I still play. I’ve played since I was 10 years old, and it’s just the greatest game. I just wanted to be around the sport in any capacity – it could have been doing PR, it could have been sales, it could have been Zamboni driver. I just wanted to be around the game.

“That was the path; there really was no plan B. I tell students that was very foolish because I put all my eggs in the hockey basket, which was incredibly stupid, but it worked out. I’m very lucky that it did.”

While he may hail from rival territory, Mears said it feels like he’s an honorary Ohioan. It started when he went to Bowling Green, a school with a proud hockey history that provided an excellent opportunity to break into the business calling games on the student radio station.

It also introduced Mears to the Buckeye State, as he had roommates and made friends from all around the state who he remains close to. Upon moving to Columbus this summer, Mears said he immediately felt the same Ohio hospitality that he first found at BGSU.

“As far as the warmth from the people, I’m not surprised at all because I saw that firsthand working at Bowling Green,” Mears said. “This is a continuation of college, and something I’ve said all along, it’s come full circle. This is the first state where I was on the air for the first time, where I called a hockey game for the first time, where I was on the radio for the first time. Now here I am back where it started, and I couldn’t be more thrilled.”

That was reciprocated by Blue Jackets fans during the preseason. Before the first home game of the slate, Mears posted on social media that he would be meeting fans by the goal cannon during the first intermission. He did the same for the second preseason contest, and that casual introduction to the CBJ fan base quickly became part of his gamedays.

“By the third home preseason game, I didn’t have to put it on social because people were already there,” Mears said. “I met some fans, shook some hands of wonderful people from all over Central Ohio that are such passionate hockey fans and knowledgeable about the team and the game. I got to talk with some people and show my face and introduce myself and thank them for all the support and thank them for what they will be doing, watching all season long and giving Jody and I a bunch of support. I had so much fun doing that.”

From his first game at Bowling Green, Mears wanted to be in hockey, but like anyone in broadcasting, it wasn’t an easy road. His first job out of college was with the Bossier-Shreveport Mudbugs of the Central Hockey League, a now-defunct league with teams in such outposts as Amarillo, Odessa, Lubbock and San Angelo, Texas.

There, broadcasting is just 5 percent of the job, Mears said, and he did everything from load skate sharpeners into frigid arenas to scheduling postgame meals for players. But it was the best education to learn all that it takes to put a hockey team on the ice, and Mears still stays in touch with many of his coworkers from that time.

He clearly had an aptitude for the broadcasting side, too, earning CHL Broadcaster of the Year honors in 2005. He then joined the New York Islanders as the club’s radio play-by-play announcer from 2006-09 before returning to Pittsburgh as a host on the Penguins Radio Network and contributor on PensTV from 2009-12.

From there, he worked for NHL Network, serving as a show host and the voice of such events as the IIHF World Juniors. In 2017, he returned to the Pens as a television and radio broadcaster.

Along the way, inspirations from such notable voices as Doc Emrick, Gary Thorne and Pittsburgh legend Mike Lange helped shape his style. But the most important thing that he hopes comes through in his work is a joy for the game.

“That is a huge part of it,” he said. “It’s not dentistry. There’s a place for stats and analytics and all that, but you have to have fun. That’s why I think we’re going to be a really good team, because Jody is one of my favorite people in the business. We’ve gotten along for a long time. I’m a big fan of his on the air and off the air. I loved watching him play and have such admiration for the role that he played in a long professional career, so I can’t wait. We’re going to have a lot of fun.”

And as for those Pittsburgh ties, don’t think he’ll secretly be wearing the black and gold underneath his new CBJ colors. All of the old Pens gear quickly found a new home, replaced by union blue and goal red. The Mears family, including his young son Carter, is true blue now.

“The first thing we bought was my son got a Blue Jackets jersey,” Mears said. “He will have no recollection of being born in Western PA. He’s going to be a Blue Jackets fan from day one. His earliest hockey memories will be at Nationwide, and he’ll probably learn to skate here in Ohio at one of the Chiller rinks. That’s pretty special to think that he’s going to be raised in such a wonderful place. That means more than anything.”

Add it all up and Mears feels like he’s in the right place at the right time. The only thing left to do is get started.

“I don’t know if I could have gotten any more of a perfect landing spot,” Mears said. “To end up in this type of organization and see the side of the city I was not aware of, it’s almost too good to be true. Now it’s time to get to work and put together the best broadcast that we can every single night.”

The Hockey News / 6 Days Until Opening Night At Nationwide Arena: The History Of Jersey #6

By Jason Newland – October 10, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have had many players don the Union Blue in its history. The #6 has only been worn a handful of times though.

Let's look at the players that have worn the number.

Who Wore It First?

- **Jamie Heward** - Heward played 97 games with Columbus, and had 30 points. He retired with the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2009.

Who Wore It Last?

- **Billy Sweezy** - Sweezy played 9 games with Columbus and had a single point. He his time with Cleveland of the AHL, playing three seasons and totaling 26 points. He signed with his hometown Boston Bruins over the summer.

Who Wore It Best?

- **Ron Hainsey** - Hainsey played 213 games with the Jackets and totaled 83 points. After retiring in 2021 and playing 1,132 games, he now works for the NHLPA where he is the Assistant Executive Director.

Others That Have Worn #6

- **Jamie Pushor** - Pushor played 147 games with the Jackets and had 22 points. After three different stints with the CBJ, he retired in 2007. He is now the Assistant. General Manager and Dir. of Player Personnel for the Tampa Bay Lightning.
- **Anton Strålman** - He played 124 games with Columbus and totaled 52 points. He played last season in Sweden and is currently without a contract for this season.
- **Nikita Nikitin** - Nikitin played in 158 games for the Jackets and had 56 points. He left for the KHL in 2016 and retired in 2019.
- **Adam Clendening** - Clendening played four games for the Jackets in 18-19. He has never played another NHL game and left for Europe in 2023. He currently plays for the Kunlun Red Star of the KHL.

There are 6 days left until opening night at Nationwide Arena.

The Hockey News / Predictions For The 2024-25 Columbus Blue Jackets

By Jason Newland – October 10, 2024

We're one day away from the start of the 2024-25 Columbus Blue Jackets season. It's been a long journey from the end of the 23-24 season, but we're finally here.

With the Jackets moving on from Patrik Laine, losing Captain Boone Jenner and young Dmitri Voronkov to long-term injuries, and the unthinkable loss of superstar Johnny Gaudreau, this team will be fighting an uphill battle all season.

But the games must go on. So let's take a look at some predictions for the upcoming season.

Most Goals Scored - Kirill Marchenko - Marchenko had two 20-goal seasons to start his career, and broke Pierre-Luc Dubois' rookie goal-scoring record two years ago. But this year he kicks it up a notch by leading the team in goals again. But this time he scores 35 and proves himself as an elite NHL scorer.

Most Assists - Zach Werenski - Werenski had 46 assists last season and had a career year, despite missing 12 games. This year he will be looked upon to do more. This season he will break the 50 assist mark by finishing with 56 assists. He will just miss out-scoring Sean Monahan for the team lead.

Most Points - Sean Monahan - Monahan is averaging 58 points per 82 games played and had 59 last season. This year he will be the top-line center unless Adam Fantilli takes the spot. Monahan will no doubt be playing with a heavy heart this season, but he will channel Johnny throughout the season. His career high is 82 points with the Calgary Flames. This season he will lead the Jackets with 70 points.

Most Points By A Defenseman - Zach Werenski - Zach Werenski is the obvious answer being that he's by far and away the best scoring defender on the team. Last year he set career highs in assists and points, but this year he will be looking for more. He will finish with 68 points, just a couple of points behind Sean Monahan.

Most Wins By A Goalie - Elvis Merzljikins - Elvis played well in the pre-season and looks to carry that over into the regular season. It's no secret it's going to be a tough year for this team, but Elvis looks to regain his old form. With all that said, Merzljikins will do his part and win 20 games. While 20 wins doesn't seem like a lot, this team isn't expected to win many, so in this case, it is. He will outplay Daniil Tarasov and earn the majority of the starts for Columbus.

Player Who Will Have A Breakout Season - Kent Johnson - Johnson is the sexy pick for this prediction, so I'm not exactly thinking outside the box on this one. Johnson has packed on some muscle and looks physically bigger, both on and off the ice. If, and that's a big IF, he can stay consistent and healthy, Johnson should have no problem breaking his personal record of 40 points he set during his rookie season two years ago. Don Waddell is going to give him every opportunity to succeed, and he needs to take full advantage of it. Johnson will have a breakout year and reach 50 points and will lead the team in power play points with 24.

First Player Traded - Ivan Provorov - Provorov did fine in his first season as a Jacket, but his contract is up after this year, and Don Waddell will want to get something for him. But that's not the reason why he'll be traded. He'll be traded because Denton Mateychuk will give them no choice but to call him up. Look for Mateychuk to be called up at some point, causing Waddell to have to make some tough decisions.

The 24-25 season will be here tomorrow for the CBJ. This first season is most definitely not gone how Don Waddell had envisioned, but the games have to be played and players need to be on the ice.

Losing important players such as Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov is going to hurt, but that gives other players a chance to step up and prove that they deserve to be in the NHL.

Buckle up for a wild ride this season.

The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Appears On Rothman & Ice For The First Time This Season To Talk About His Team

By Jason Newland – October 10, 2024

The first question he was asked was about how the team was feeling after a very tough, emotional summer. He says, "I think we're in a good place. Obviously, there's no denying there was some tough stretches there. It was pretty devastating what we went through, and what we continue to go through. But, I think as a group right now, our mindset is to go and get two points in our first game. I think emotionally through training camp, through pre-season, through these last few practice days, I feel as if we're in a good spot right now. We've been leaning on each other, the coaches have done a great job getting us ready, and it's finally time to do what we love to do, and that's play hockey. I think emotionally right now we're in as good a space as we can be."

He also spoke on the coaching change and what he thinks so far. "It's been awesome having him (Evason) here. He's very passionate, which I think's great. He's very black or white, there's no gray areas with our systems, with how he wants us to play, with what he expects from each guy, and I think that's huge for a hockey team. Guys can just go out there and play, they know their roles, they know what's expected of them. I'm excited to get this thing started tomorrow with him, with the real season. So far it's been really good," Werenski says.

On comparing Evason's camp to others, he had some very interesting things to say. "I like this camp a lot. I feel like in years past we really haven't gotten the systems until like week two, towards the end of camp. But this year right away, there was a smaller group at camp, so only two groups, and we had to get into systems right away, which I think's really important. I felt the camp was structured really well this year for us to learn the systems right away, and almost get a head start on some teams that's not doing systems this early. I thought camp was structured really well and thought as a group we got a lot out of it going into the season," he said.

In the past, CBJ camps had 65+ players invited. This year it started well below that number.

He went on to talk about some of his teammates, how he trains in the summer, and what his expectations are for his season.

He also talked about the team trip to Ohio Stadium to take in a Buckeye football game. He said that Adam Fantilli "was pretty rattled" when rumors were floating around that he was wearing an OSU hat. Fantilli also posted an Instagram video of him panning around the stadium where you can hear him saying "EWWWW."

1st Ohio Battery / It's All Part Of The Plan: Blue Jackets Roster Decisions This Week Were Not Always Popular, But Are For The Best

By Ed Francis – October 10, 2024

Since before training camp started, President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell said he would be searching for additional scoring to add to the Columbus Blue Jackets roster.

Then Dmitri Voronkov went down — in a preseason *game*.

Then Boone Jenner went down — in a preseason *practice*.

Two top six forwards — who ranked second (Jenner) and fourth (Voronkov) on the team in goals per 60 minutes last season among qualifying players — suddenly out of the lineup for what appears to be a significant amount of time.

It put Waddell (and new head coach Dean Evason) in an even tougher position. The losses of Jenner and Voronkov were a blow to a team that was already going to have trouble scoring, yes, but it also created a "next man up" dilemma.

How do the Blue Jackets fill those gaps in the lineup? Do they panic-buy and trade valuable assets for top-six forward help? That would be an option if the team were ready to compete for a postseason run... but they're not.

Do they rush prospects like James Malatesta into the NHL? The Blue Jackets have had their fair share of prospects who came up too early, either because they played too many minutes too soon or, just the opposite: they got stuck playing bottom-six minutes and had their growth stunted because of it. That's also not the ideal option.

So the club made the best decision they could make: elevate those they felt were ready to produce regularly in the NHL (Mikael Pyyhtia, for example) and look around the league for veterans to fill those roles until either a) the injuries heal or b) the prospects are ready.

In the case of Malatesta (and Luca Del Bel Belluz, and likely Gavin Brindley until he was out with a broken hand), the club rightly decided that what was best for those players was not to see a limited, fourth-line role in Columbus. Instead, having them play in Cleveland and get top-line minutes in the AHL was more important.

So Columbus picked up Kevin Labanc from a tryout contract with the New Jersey Devils and then added Zach Aston-Reese off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights. In doing so, the Blue Jackets protected their top prospects from being overexposed too soon at the NHL level.

Then there's the decision to send Denton Mateychuk to Cleveland. A tough decision, because it truly looks like he's ready to contribute at the highest level. But again, particularly with defensemen, the jump to the NHL can be a dangerous leap. With eight defenseman on the roster, the risk with keeping Mateychuk on the opening roster was two-fold: would he get enough playing time, and would he be in over his head? The Blue Jackets (albeit, under a different regime) fumbled the David Jiricek progression last season, and the team is still seeing the ramifications of that. No need to risk doing that again. Mateychuk is still just 20 years old.

It's also important to keep in mind that these aren't necessarily long-term decisions.

If, for example, Malatesta comes out guns-a-blazin' with the Monsters, it's safe to say that the Blue Jackets would be more comfortable with a call-up at that point than they would be right now. What will

Brindley's status be when he's back in early November from a broken finger? The club really seemed to like what they saw out of both players, so the odds that they see NHL time this season is somewhere between really high and certain.

The same can be said of Mateychuk. He'll immediately gain experience as being the top blueliner with the Monsters, and assuming that he continues to grow as a player, his stay in Cleveland will be very temporary.

Player development with Waddell in Carolina and Evason in Minnesota has a pretty good track record, so even though these moves may not have been the exciting decisions, there's no reason to believe they weren't the *right* decisions.

The Hockey News / The Cleveland Monsters Sign A Pair Of Forwards to PTO's On Monday

By Jason Newland – October 10, 2024

The Cleveland Monsters announced on Monday the signing of two forwards to PTO's.

Joseph LaBate and Chris Wilkie were signed to professional tryout contracts and will report to Cleveland's training camp. The training camp roster now sits at 21 players.

LaBate is from Minnesota and has 13 NHL games under his belt for Vancouver. He has zero career NHL points. He played in the KHL last season but has 405 games played in the AHL. He's scored 63 goals and totaled 133 points for four different AHL teams.

Wilkie is from Nebraska and has no NHL experience. He's played the last three years in Germany and Russia and has 61 games of AHL experience, and has 34 points.

The Monsters will probably need to sign a few more players due to the Blue Jackets' injury situation.

The Athletic / The 3 big problems with giving an NHL goalie a superstar salary

By James Mirtle – October 10, 2024

It's fascinating that the two biggest debates over free-agent contracts in the NHL this fall have been focused on goalies.

First, we had Jeremy Swayman and the Boston Bruins. The negotiation went public and got a bit nasty before finally resolving where it should have.

Now we're onto another marquee talent and franchise, with Igor Shesterkin reportedly turning down a massive \$88 million offer from the New York Rangers this week.

The narrative in goalie circles right now is that some of these star netminders want to change the paradigm regarding goalie salaries. For years, they'd argue, the top goalies have been underpaid while the offensive stars continue to push the envelope, with Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Auston Matthews and Leon Draisaitl setting AAV records year after year.

They're not wrong that goalies haven't been getting paid. When Swayman signed his new eight-year, \$8.25 million-a-season deal, he became only the fifth active goalie with an AAV of more than \$6.4 million, joining Sergei Bobrovsky, Andrei Vasilevskiy, Connor Hellebuyck and Ilya Sorokin. That's it.

Contrast the five goalies at that number with the 81 forwards and 42 defensemen making more than \$6.4 million, and it's a pretty large divide. Those figures equate to under 8 percent of the regular goaltenders in the game making more than 7.27 percent of the cap, compared to 21 percent of forwards and 22 percent of defensemen hitting that mark.

The biggest reason for the trend?

Well, quite simply, general managers don't want to pay them. Even as some of the top names in the goalie guild are making noise about wanting a bigger piece of the pie, behind the scenes, executives will tell you they can't afford to bet on them the way they will a top goal scorer or No. 1 defenseman.

Here's why.

1. You rarely know what you're going to get

The toughest thing by far with goalies in the NHL right now is projecting future performance.

In fact, a typical NHL goaltender's performance can vary on average by more than 14 goals against every 40 games, which can mean the difference between a star goalie and an average one, or an average one and a poor one. (That's roughly the difference between having a .915 save percentage and a .904, depending on shot volume faced.)

This level of volatility tends to apply to the top netminders, too. Those excelling in the crease change every few years, with only a few repeat Vezina winners in the 20 years of the cap era.

That means assuming your star goalie will be able to earn an elite salary for more than a short window doesn't always pay off.

Take the past 12 years, going back to the last lockout in 2012. If we separate the top 10 goalies into three-year spans (using goals saved above expected and a minimum of 90 games played) in that period, we get a list that looks like so, in order of performance:

2013-15: Henrik Lundqvist, Carey Price, Cory Schneider, Semyon Varlamov, Kari Lehtonen, Jaroslav Halak, Tuukka Rask, Jonathan Bernier, Corey Crawford, Ben Bishop

2016-18: John Gibson, Jonathan Quick, Sergei Bobrovsky, Corey Crawford, Braden Holtby, Antti Raanta, Cam Talbot, Frederik Andersen, Henrik Lundqvist, Mike Smith

2019-21: Robin Lehner, Connor Hellebuyck, Ben Bishop, Petr Mrázek, Jordan Binnington, Darcy Kuemper, Juuse Saros, John Gibson, Marc-André Fleury, Andrei Vasilevskiy

2022-24: Connor Hellebuyck, Igor Shesterkin, Ilya Sorokin, Juuse Saros, Linus Ullmark, Frederik Andersen, Jacob Markström, Andrei Vasilevskiy, Jeremy Swayman, Stuart Skinner

There simply aren't a lot of repeat names there, outside of the very elite like Lundqvist and Hellebuyck, who show up twice. What you do get is a ton of one-and-done types, who perform for two or three seasons and then sink back to mediocrity.

And that appears to hold true no matter how you slice up the data.

All that said, giving a goalie a higher cap hit for elite performance wouldn't be an issue if they were asking for shorter-term contracts than skaters. But when the norm is a massive seven- or eight-year deal, and only a few goalies can maintain a high level of play for more than a two- or three-year stretch, it puts GMs in a difficult position.

And that serves to bring down the AAV, as the level of certainty that you'll get value out of netminders isn't always there the way it is with position players.

2. Age comes for goalies in a big way

We know from years of research that NHL players can get "old" fast.

Scoring tends to peak between the ages of 23 and 27. So, too, do other aspects of offensive play.

Goaltenders aren't dramatically different, except any negative impact they make obviously can impact a team far more directly given they're in the crease for the entire game and every goal against can be a backbreaker.

The above chart comes from Cam Lawrence, a statistical analyst who used to write publicly at "Canucks Army" and now works for the Columbus Blue Jackets. He concluded a goalie's peak can extend a bit later than a skater's, typically into their late 20s, but the falloff is dramatic by around 34, even for top goalies.

This is particularly relevant regarding Shesterkin, whose next contract won't kick in until he is almost 30 years old. A \$12 million deal over eight years could age poorly by about its midway point, based on historical norms for similar players.

And that might be a best-case scenario. The modern style of goaltending is very hard on players' bodies, and by the time they reach their late 20s, they've often been playing high-level goal for close to 15 years. Some starters have had to battle through multiple hip surgeries and other lower-body injuries, playing at diminished capacity for years. Some surgeons now seem to make their living putting goalies back together again.

Other goalies who have signed big contracts like Price and Bishop suffered career-ending injuries in their early 30s and retired with multiple expensive years left on their deals.

Consider there are only 13 goalies who are 33 or older under contract this season in the NHL. Two of them have retired due to injury (Price and Lehner), and one is a third-stringer (James Reimer). Only three were No. 1s last season (Markström, Talbot and Bobrovsky).

That's one key reason why the Swayman contract could be a bigger win than most bloated goalie deals: He's far younger than most goaltenders established enough to command an eight-year deal.

Swayman, 25, will turn 33 only during the final year of his contract, meaning he can transition into a tandem or backup role and sign another contract after this one, health permitting.

3. You can't hide a big goalie salary

This is partially an extension of No. 2, but it's important enough that it deserves its own category.

With skaters, you can sign them to big, bloated contracts as free agents and ride out the later years by playing them down the lineup. Typically, skaters maintain their defensive ability later in their careers too, adding an extra benefit to their play that extends their utility.

Players like Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin come to mind. They're making too much for what they bring to the Dallas Stars' second and third lines, at more than \$9 million a season each, but they're still effective enough in more limited roles that their team can contend for a championship even while spending nearly a quarter of its cap space on their salaries.

That's typically not going to be the case for an \$11 million goalie in their mid-30s, as that high of a salary will limit how much you can pay a backup and force you to rely on the aging No. 1 for 50-plus games and then the postseason.

The other thing is that, unlike goaltenders, there are a remarkable number of skaters over the age of 33 playing at a high level. Brent Burns, Anze Kopitar, Kris Letang, Sidney Crosby, Mats Zuccarello, Brad Marchand, Claude Giroux, Patrick Kane, Alex Ovechkin, Ryan McDonagh, Chris Tanev, Erik Karlsson, John Carlson, Drew Doughty, Nazem Kadri, Alex Pietrangelo, John Tavares, Steven Stamkos and Roman Josi are basically all more effective everyday players than almost any goaltender in the same age bracket.

Paying skaters more for longer simply makes sense given the risks and rewards involved. And while it's hard for the goalie union to see teammates at the top of their games get rewarded more than they are as the salary cap has risen, that's probably going to be the reality for all but the select few.

Shesterkin has proven such an elite talent in his first four years in the NHL that it's understandable the Rangers want to bet on him and hope he proves these trends wrong. But even with his track record (which is only 213 regular-season games), an eight-year deal for more than \$90 million will be a considerable gamble.

What Bobrovsky has done is a strong outlier performance, not the norm, and his deal shouldn't be the model for goalie contracts to come.

Swayman's deal, on the other hand, may well prove a better new template, given his age and the lower AAV involved.

The Athletic / How a collector is using Asian hockey cards to build community and recognize a trailblazer

By Ambika Sharma – October 10, 2024

When Chris Woo was 13 years old, he sent a letter addressed to the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, specifically to forward Paul Kariya.

“I wrote about how cool it was to see a player of Japanese descent get drafted so high,” said Woo, who is of Chinese and Japanese descent. “I never thought I’d hear back from him.”

Kariya was selected by the expansion Mighty Ducks earlier that year as the No. 4 pick in the 1993 NHL Draft.

When Woo was in elementary school, he would occasionally write to the Los Angeles Kings in the '80s and early '90s. He was used to getting the same response: a postcard, sometimes signed without personalization, sometimes pre-printed with an autograph.

This time, though, there was something else.

Woo opened the envelope to find a single Kariya 1993-94 Fleer Ultra Team Canada card with Kariya's signature in gold. No note or letter accompanied it.

“Kariya's was special, and a little mysterious, because it was just a card signed in gold pen, without any message,” Woo said. “I had never received a card from a hockey player.”

“I hold that one near to my heart,” Woo said. “It has a lot of sentimental value.”

That single card helped launch a passion project for Woo called Asian Hockey Card Collection: one that has grown to include 550 hockey cards, with 504 individual players — all of Asian descent. Along with it, an Instagram page with over 2,500 followers and a website database to share his collection.

Woo, now 45 years old and a corporate lawyer, grew up in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. The same place where Korean American NHL veteran Richard Park, who played 14 seasons and 738 games in the NHL for six different teams including Anaheim, was raised.

Woo fell in love with hockey at the age of six, when his father took him to his first Kings game at the Great Western Forum.

The next day in school, his teacher asked about his weekend and he told her about the Kings game.

A day later, the teacher gifted him a signed photo of former Kings player Marcel Dionne.

“It turns out she was next-door neighbors to (former Kings) Marcel, Jimmy Carson and Luc Robitaille who were young and were living with him at the time,” Woo said.

Woo remained a Kings fan, but he also branched out to other Southern California teams when Asian players, such as Kariya, played in Anaheim or when Robin Bawa, the first player of South Asian descent in the NHL, played for the San Jose Sharks.

His passion for the game translated onto the ice, where Woo played club hockey for UCLA.

For Woo growing up, print photos and cards were one of the only ways he could see what his role models looked like, other than on TV.

In the 1992 NHL Draft, Hiroyuki Miura became the league's first real Japanese player ever drafted when the Montreal Canadiens chose him in the 11th round with the No. 260 pick.

"Before the days of the Internet, before widespread coverage on TV, for an Asian person like me, there weren't many of us (in the NHL). So when you did see a name or a face, it was like, 'Wow, that's pretty cool. There's someone out there that sounds (like an) Asian defenseman,'" Woo said.

The only problem? Miura's late-round selection made finding information about him a challenge for Woo.

"I remember specifically when reading about him, looking through the draft results and seeing that name and always wondering, 'OK, what does he look like? A defenseman? Is he a big guy, or a small guy? Is he a puck-moving defenseman, or is he defensive?'"

"I still to this day don't know what he looks like. I know there's one card out there that exists ... but I've never seen him," Woo said.

That one card is a 1993-94 Wheeling Thunderbirds Photo Pack Hiroyuki Miura card. It is still the card Woo is most eager to add to his collection.

"Cards did give you a picture — a fuller picture — of who the player was," Woo said.

In early 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Woo returned to his old hobby of card collecting. As his collection grew, he wanted to educate others on Asian hockey players.

Woo began using Instagram to share his collection in a space that attracted the attention of those with the same interest.

Rediscovering an old passion is one thing, but Woo also felt it was important to tell the players' stories. He wanted to go beyond just the picture and information that fits onto a sports card.

His research led him to want to advocate for one player in particular, one who was not only an Asian hockey player, but the one who paved the way for everyone else who has followed.

That player was Larry Kwong. A Chinese Canadian born in 1923 in Vernon, B.C., Kwong became the first Asian to play in the NHL after he was called up to the New York Rangers against the Montreal Canadiens on March 13, 1948 at the Montreal Forum.

Kwong's single shift in the third period lasted a minute, yet it made NHL history.

"He broke the Asian color barrier," Woo said.

With a growing community on Instagram, Woo then created a petition to induct Kwong into the Hockey Hall of Fame in the builder category. The petition now has over 12,000 signatures.

"That's what my Instagram page is really about. It's about sharing the stories, the backgrounds of these players that otherwise the community wouldn't know about," Woo said.

"That's the same with Larry. You only have one shift in the NHL, but there is a deeper backstory there that people should really try to take notice of."

Kwong died on March 15, 2018, and although he was inducted into the BC Sports Hall of Fame in 2013, the goal to see Kwong posthumously inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame remains an ongoing objective for Woo.

"I think the ultimate acceptance (from the hockey community) would be getting him inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame," Woo said.

The HHOF permits that “Only members of the Hockey Hall of Fame Selection Committee may submit official nominations of candidates for election into Honoured Membership,” according to its website.

When asked about the possibility of Kwong being considered for selection by The Athletic, the HHOF responded in an email:

“While we appreciate receiving ‘public submissions’ our management, staff and members of the Board of Directors and Selection Committee refrain from commenting on any particular candidate other than those successfully nominated and elected so as to comply with the confidentiality provisions set out in the Hockey Hall of Fame’s corporate by-laws.”

Woo’s ongoing ambition to petition for the NHL’s first Asian player includes collecting and sharing his Kwong cards. His favorite is Kwong’s first card, which he believes is over 70 years old.

The card features Kwong in the Quebec Senior Hockey League, where he played for the Valleyfield Braves, scoring 66 points in 60 games; it was a year after he was named the league’s MVP in 1951.

“The Larry Kwong card is special to me,” Woo said. “There are very few of these cards in existence.”

Cards like Kwong’s are what make Woo’s Instagram page the perfect platform to share his collection. There’s an equal emphasis on famous player cards that people can recognize by just looking at them. Then there are the cards of players that few people know about.

“The Instagram account has followers of diverse backgrounds. You have collectors who like to see not necessarily the Jason Robertsons or the Nick Suzukis, but some of these players who played in the minors or the juniors they never knew were Asian,” Woo said.

“But then you actually look at it and there are quite a few.”

Although Woo knows that some of the Kwong cards in his collection could go for hundreds of dollars, he never thinks about selling them or their monetary value. Others are junior hockey cards and don’t hold much dollar value, but Woo knows how much they are worth in his eyes.

“I would never and I do not sell any of the cards,” Woo said. “For me, it’s more of just something that I like to pull out every now and then and look at and admire and then also tell the story.”

This includes unique collector’s items, such as a Keanu Reeves trading card from an old board game. There are no official Reeves hockey cards, although that card features a photo of him in a hockey jersey.

“It’s historically the most popular post on my Instagram account, partially because not many people knew that Reeves played hockey growing up and had junior and professional hockey goalie ambitions as a youth,” Woo said.

Reeves was slated to try out for the Windsor Spitfires of the Canadian Hockey League. An injury prevented him from attending, and he ended up going to New York to recuperate, where he became interested in acting.

“I actually saw him play in a charity event in the early 2000s, and he was very good,” Woo said.

On Aug. 22, two years after Woo’s post, the Windsor Spitfires signed Reeves to a one-day contract where he signed memorabilia for charity.

Whether it is a card of an All-Star pro Asian hockey player, or one that paved the way by playing one shift, Woo hopes that increasing the visibility of these players will continue to grow the game within the Asian community, both in North America and internationally.

“It shows that there are NHL players that look like you,” Woo said. “And I think it opens up the possibilities for these (young) players to chase the dream, as well.”

[The Athletic / Ranking the bad NHL teams most likely to end up with 2025's No. 1 draft pick](#)

By Harman Dayal and Sean McIndoe – October 10, 2024

No team or fan base enters the season in October hoping to finish at the bottom of the league standings.

Everybody's optimistic and would like to envision a best-case scenario for how the year could play out, even if that means just being semi-competitive on the way to losing more games than you win. However, when we're halfway through the season many of those dreams will already be shattered. The May draft lottery will be inching closer at that point, the hype around the presumptive No. 1 pick (it's James Hagens right now) will be escalating and many fan bases will start praying for losses rather than wins.

Which teams are best positioned to sink to the basement of the NHL standings this season? Which bottom-feeders from last year will be moving out of the bottom five? Let's dive in.

Teams ready to graduate from the basement

Utah Hockey Club

2023-24 finish: 27th

Key acquisitions: Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino, Ian Cole

Key prospects arriving: None

Key departures: J.J. Moser

Two powerful drivers could fuel Utah's rise up the standings this season.

The first is that their blue line is miles better than what they iced last year. Mikhail Sergachev instantly becomes the club's No. 1 defender. The 26-year-old missed most of last season because of a leg injury but in 2022-23 he broke out with 64 points in 78 games while finishing 16th in Norris Trophy voting. John Marino's addition should bolster the second pair, even though he's coming off a down year in New Jersey. Ian Cole and second-year player Michael Kesselring should quietly form one of the most underrated bottom pairs in the league too. This is a deep, playoff-caliber defense group.

Utah should also see internal growth from several young forwards. Logan Cooley scored 44 points as a rookie. He finished the season on a tear — looking significantly more dangerous at five-on-five than he did at the start of his rookie campaign — and is primed for a breakout year. Utah will benefit from having Dylan Guenther, who dazzled after a January recall with 35 points in 45 games, in the NHL for a full season. Matias Maccelli, 23, is an underrated playmaking winger and should continue improving. Josh Doan also impressed down the stretch with nine points in 11 games — he should add juice to the club's bottom six.

It'd be disappointing if Utah isn't in the mix for a playoff spot.

Seattle Kraken

2023-24 finish: 25th

Key acquisitions: Chandler Stephenson, Brandon Montour

Key prospects arriving: Shane Wright

Key departures: Justin Schultz, Brian Dumoulin

The Kraken should be closer to the playoff race than they are to the bottom of the league standings.

Seattle was the only team that missed the playoffs despite ranking top 10 in goals against per game last season. The team will be competitive if it can manufacture more offense and that seems like a realistic aspiration. Chandler Stephenson and Brandon Montour's contracts are risky but on the ice, they'll unquestionably inject more scoring. Colleague Dom Luszczyszyn's model had Seattle as the league's seventh most improved team this offseason.

Matty Beniers was snakebitten last year and should take a major offensive leap in Year 3. Shane Wright is also ready to jump into the NHL full-time and should emerge as a core piece.

It also helps that the Pacific Division looks pretty weak. San Jose, Anaheim and Calgary are all going to struggle. The Kings, who profile like a team that could battle with Seattle for a playoff spot, arguably got worse on paper in the summer and will now be without Drew Doughty for a while due to a fractured ankle.

Ottawa Senators

2023-24 finish: 26th

Key acquisitions: Linus Ullmark, Nick Jensen, David Perron, Michael Amadio

Key prospects arriving: Tyler Kleven

Key departures: Jakob Chychrun, Mathieu Joseph, Joonas Korpisalo

Stop me if you've heard this one before, but the Senators made some nice moves in the offseason and this should finally be the year that their young roster makes a push for a playoff spot.

Yeah, I'll stop, because we all know where this always ends up going: The summer optimism leads directly into a lousy start, the Sens are all but out of the race by November, and the next few months are spent dialing back expectations and pointing fingers.

Is there any reason to think it will be different this time? Well, yes. With a new coach, a new GM and a new owner all in place for their first full seasons, we can't assume the early-season meltdowns will continue. And while hockey is a complicated game with lots of moving parts, it's not really an oversimplification to say last year's season was torpedoed by a lack of saves. With recent Vezina winner Linus Ullmark in place now, the Senators should be fine in net, if not near the top 10. With another step forward from the youngsters, that should be more than enough to get them well clear of the basement. Playoffs? We'll see, but a trip to the postseason feels far more likely than a return to the bottom five.

Montreal Canadiens

2023-24 finish: 28th

Key acquisitions: Patrik Laine

Key prospects arriving: Lane Hutson

Key departures: Johnathan Kovacevic, Jordan Harris

Let's just say it: This would have been an easier case to make a week ago.

Back then, we would have penciled Laine into a second-line role, one where he could be conservatively projected for something like 20 goals while nodding toward a best-case scenario that was significantly

higher. We also might have included David Reinbacher as an incoming prospect, one who'd have a chance to make an impact on a thin blue line.

That changed after a disastrous preseason game against Toronto that saw both players leave with significant injuries. The news on Laine – a knee strain that won't require surgery – was actually far better than the initial assumptions of an ACL injury, but he could still miss three months and won't get the chance to find the early chemistry Montreal had been hoping for.

But even with Laine out and most of a rich prospect system needing a bit more time, the Canadiens can expect to improve organically through a maturing young roster. Another step forward from Nick Suzuki would help, as would more goals from Cole Caufield. A healthy Kirby Dach moves the needle, and the special teams can't be much worse. And while fans outside Montreal might not think much of the young goaltending duo of Sam Montembeault and Cayden Primeau, our Jesse Granger thinks they're an underrated pairing who could show out if the defense improves.

Add it all up, and it's hard to see the Canadiens getting anywhere close to a playoff spot in a stacked Atlantic. But out of the bottom five? That seems reasonable, even if the path would have been easier with a healthy Laine.

Top contenders for a bottom-five finish

The season will have twists and turns with factors such as injuries, breakouts, players who unexpectedly perform worse, luck, etc. that throw a wrench into the standings. But at least on paper, these are the teams that look most likely to finish bottom five in the NHL, ranked from least to most likely to contend for the No. 1 pick.

5. Calgary Flames

2023-24 finish: 24th

Key acquisitions: Anthony Mantha, Kevin Bahl

Key prospects arriving: Dustin Wolf moves from backup to full-time starter, Matthew Coronato, Samuel Honzek

Key departures: Jacob Markström, Andrew Mangiapane, Oliver Kylington

Why they could finish bottom-five: The rebuild, or whatever management wants to call it, continues in Calgary. Craig Conroy has been busy for the last few years, and typically when we see these many big names leave a team, a bottom-five finish isn't far behind. Mix in a middling roster, and you can see why it's become a trendy pick to have the Flames plummet down the standings.

What it would take to stay out of the basement: Without getting too far ahead of ourselves, the Flames don't just have the best 2023-24 record of the rest of our bottom-five contenders — they finished 15 points ahead of the other four. So all they have to do to make us look bad is repeat last year's results.

That will be easier said than done, especially with Markström and others subtracted from the roster (and other veterans potentially following if the sell-off continues). But while losing Markström hurts, it clears the way for Dustin Wolf to take over, and he's expected to develop into a very good starter. That might take a year or two, but if the transition is quicker it should keep the Flames out of the running for top lottery odds.

Even if Wolf struggles, there's enough veteran talent still in the fold that the Flames could stay ahead of the bottom-dwellers. MacKenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson make for a solid top pairing, and while Jonathan Huberdeau isn't going to be a 115-point guy in Calgary, there's more to his game than he's

shown in the last two years. In terms of established talent, the other teams we're talking about in this piece can't keep up with the Flames. (At least until Conroy's next big sell-off.)

The bottom line: The question in Calgary may be whether staying out of the basement this year would be a good thing, especially if the alternative is another year ending with a pick near the bottom of the top 10.

4. Chicago Blackhawks

2023-24 finish: 31st

Key acquisitions: Tyler Bertuzzi, Teuvo Teräväinen, Alec Martinez, T.J. Brodie, Laurent Brossoit, Ilya Mikheyev, Pat Maroon, Craig Smith

Key departures: Taylor Raddysh, Tyler Johnson, MacKenzie Entwistle, Nikita Zaitsev

Why they could finish bottom-five: The Blackhawks should be significantly better and more entertaining to watch than last season after a busy summer of upgrades. It's unlikely they'll make enough progress to escape another bottom-five finish, however. Think about it this way: Chicago could improve by 24 points this season, from 52 to 76, and that still wouldn't be enough to escape the bottom five based on last year's standings.

Chicago plays in the deep, difficult Central Division. Dallas, Colorado, Nashville and Winnipeg all look like playoff-caliber teams on paper. On top of that, Utah could be one of the most improved teams in the league. Minnesota and St. Louis are trapped in mediocrity, but their rosters still look better than the Blackhawks.

Chicago lacks established high-end defensemen beyond Alex Vlasic and Seth Jones, despite the additions of credible, experienced veterans like Martinez and Brodie. Up front, they've got a much deeper forward group but still lack elite scoring talent besides Connor Bedard. Even after the Bertuzzi and Teräväinen signings, the Blackhawks don't have a single player besides Bedard who scored more than 60 points last season.

What it would take to climb out of the basement: Bedard's going to break out as a sophomore; the only question is how big of a leap it'll be. In a best-case scenario, it's conceivable he could become a 100-point player and immediately cement himself as a top 15-20 player in the league. Is that the most likely outcome? Probably not. But if Bedard immediately reaches that level of superstardom, he'll have a shot to drag the Blackhawks higher up the standings than we're projecting here.

Besides Bedard, Chicago will need the likes of Teräväinen, Taylor Hall and Bertuzzi to elevate a power play that clicked at just 16.6 percent. A Lukas Reichel breakout would also add more scoring punch to the group.

On the back end, the club would need Martinez and Brodie to channel something more closely resembling their prime top-four level.

The bottom line: Chicago will win a lot more games this year — the roster is better at every position and should get internal growth from the young players — but the team still doesn't have enough high-end talent to truly rocket up the standings.

3. Anaheim Ducks

2023-24 finish: 30th

Key acquisitions: Robby Fabbri, Brian Dumoulin

Key prospects arriving: Cutter Gauthier, Tristan Luneau, Nathan Gaucher, full year of Olen Zellweger

Key departures: None

Why they could finish bottom-five: They were very bad last year, their biggest addition in the offseason was Robby Fabbri and their veteran goalie is hurt. Other than that, going great.

What it would take to climb out of the basement: Big strides forward from the youth. That's not impossible to imagine, especially in a league where development isn't necessarily linear. But as was pointed out in our Ducks season preview, we didn't really see it last year — the kids were fine, but nobody really raised the view of their ceiling except for maybe Mason McTavish early on.

The goaltending situation is tough, with John Gibson on the shelf due to appendicitis. That's not a positive, but it does mean Lukas Dostal will get an early chance at extra playing time. He showed some flashes last year despite ending with middling numbers, and if he can find a new level at 24 then the Ducks could surprise us.

The bottom line: The other elephant in the room is the Trevor Zegras trade rumors. They've been around long enough that they probably belong in the believe-it-when-you-see-it category, but trading an established young NHLer for picks or prospects would mean a step back in the short term. Then again, maybe this is the year Zegras lives up to the franchise-player hype for a full season and drags the group along with him. Youth is volatile, and you never know when a young team will surprise you. But that works in both directions, and there may just be too much ground for the current Ducks to make up to escape the bottom five.

2. Columbus Blue Jackets

2023-24 finish: 29th

Key acquisitions: Sean Monahan, James van Riemsdyk, Jack Johnson

Key prospects arriving: None

Key departures: Alexandre Texier, Adam Boqvist, Alex Nylander

Why they could finish bottom-five: The Blue Jackets are still mourning the devastating deaths of the Gaudreau brothers. We couldn't write this story, however, without acknowledging that Columbus is rebuilding and likely to have a challenging season on the ice.

The Blue Jackets didn't have a single player hit 70 points last season and have one of the least proven goaltending tandems in the NHL. The back end isn't very good either, despite some talented pieces. Columbus will ice several exciting blue-chip youngsters worth watching this season but those players are inexperienced and far from hitting their prime.

What it would take to climb out of the basement: Nearly every young player would need to break out and new bench boss Dean Evason would need to coach exceptionally well. Up front, Adam Fantilli looks like a virtual lock to leap forward. Kent Johnson is a big wild card; can he pop off as a top-six winger? Kirill Marchenko, Yegor Chinakhov and Cole Sillinger would need to continue improving. On the back end, it'd be a huge bonus if David Jiříček can establish himself as a top-four defender or if Denton Mateychuk really blows the door off and makes a major NHL impact ahead of schedule. Columbus also ranked top-three for man games lost to injury last season — can they stay healthier in 2024-25?

The bottom line: Columbus should be significantly better coached this year under Evason and the young core should improve, but there's probably too much ground for them to make up to escape the lottery conversation, especially given how substantially many of last year's bottom feeders improved.

1. San Jose Sharks

2023-24 finish: 32nd

Key acquisitions: Tyler Toffoli, Alex Wennberg, Barclay Goodrow

Key prospects arriving: Macklin Celebrini, Will Smith, Yaroslav Askarov

Key departures: Alex Barabanov, Filip Zadina, Mike Hoffman

Why they could finish bottom-five: It sure seems to be the plan, as Mike Grier continues the multiyear rebuild. They've moved past the tear-it-all-down phase and this is the year that Sharks fans will start to reap some of the rewards, watching Celebrini and Smith do their thing. Askarov will presumably get his shot at the starter's job once he's healthy, although he'll have his work cut out for him behind this group. It should all make for a fascinating and probably even entertaining season. But it won't be a good one.

What it would take to climb out of the basement: It's rare, but we have seen rebuilding teams take big leaps forward. The Sharks' best-case scenario probably looks like the 2016-17 Maple Leafs, where Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander all debuted and pushed the team from last place to a wild-card spot. Celebrini and Smith have that sort of potential, but absolutely everything would have to go right to get within range of the playoff race, especially with big questions on the blue line. It could happen, but it's a massive long shot. And probably not part of Grier's plan.

The bottom line: Grier has a plan, and he's following it. This year, that plan should include guiding Smith and Celebrini through their rookie campaigns and figuring out what else they have in a stocked prospect cupboard. Winning would be nice, but it's not the main goal, and if it doesn't happen and the Sharks wind up with another top pick then that will be just fine.

[Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: How Igor Shesterkin's next contract will change the market](#)

By Elliotte Friedman – October 10, 2024

Let's start with some Igor Shesterkin.

As I see it, there are two ingredients in this logic problem. One: Shesterkin is the Rangers' best and most-important player. Two: people can't wrap their heads around what this could mean for his salary.

I can't confirm the specifics of Kevin Weekes' massive report — Shesterkin turning down an eight-year, \$88M offer. (Not saying he's wrong, not at all, just that I can't get confirmation of the numbers.) But I think he's bang on that, if the Rangers offered this, it wouldn't be accepted.

Shesterkin is Manhattan's backbone. The Rangers are built around him, his strengths the liquid paper to their weaknesses. They know it and they admit it. When Florida eliminated New York in the Eastern Final, Vincent Trocheck skated to Shesterkin and said something.

"I was just letting him know that he had a fantastic series and he kept us in a lot of those games," Trocheck said. "And if anybody was to feel good about themselves post-series, he should feel proud."

New York's highest-paid player is the sublime and superb Artemi Panarin. His cap hit is slightly above \$11.64 million. I believe Shesterkin's representatives (agent is Rick Komarow) have a simple argument: Igor is your best player, he should be compensated as such. In theory, no one disagrees.

In practice, we've got a problem. And the problem is the position.

The highest-paid AAV ever for a goalie is Carey Price, at \$10.5M. The Rangers have made it very clear: we will beat that. Shesterkin will set a new standard, launching netminding salaries into the stratosphere.

Yet, at this point, we've got videos of Jeremy Swayman driving into Boston's parking garage and Linus Ullmark standing in Steve Staios' office. No Shesterkin videos of something uniquely New York, though. Like writing an angry headline about Aaron Judge in the playoffs.

Why not? Part of this is the Rangers looking at new contracts for Alexis Lafreniere and K'Andre Miller. There's only so much available. But most of it is about what goalies get paid.

The Rangers aren't comfortable with where Shesterkin wants to go. I don't know exactly what that is, but I have theories.

Let's start with Panarin. Let's say Shesterkin wants \$11.65M, slightly above the winger. That would beat Price by \$1.15M. It's a big jump. Look at the highest-paid skaters since Connor McDavid signed his current contract. Nathan MacKinnon passed it, by \$100,000. Auston Matthews leapt over him by \$625,000. Now, Leon Draisaitl hurdled that by \$750,000 more. In this case, Shesterkin's raise would dwarf all of those.

But, the more teams and agents you talk to, the more you hear "percentage of cap" being the critical indicator — especially as the salary ceiling is expected to rise. No agent or player wishes to sign something that looks relatively small if things go where predicted.

Draisaitl, MacKinnon, Matthews and McDavid all signed for between 15-16 per cent of the cap. (McDavid is highest, at 15.72.) Panarin is at 14.29. Without knowing for sure, I suspect this is closer to Shesterkin's initial ask. That would be \$12.58M.

Again, I want to stress that I don't know, it is purely a theory. But I think I'm in the ballpark with the above two scenarios. I can see where the Rangers would think differently if it was a forward. They aren't comfortable doing this for a goalie, and they wouldn't be the only ones.

There are fewer and fewer A-list, stud netminders these days. That's why we've seen their salaries suppressed — at least until this week — unless you have one of the elites.

And the Rangers do.

I could be wrong — it's happened before — but that's why, ultimately, I think they are going to bend some. Shesterkin is too important; they'd basically have to re-wire their roster if he leaves.

Clip-and-save, we will see if I'm right.

THOUGHTS

1. All of that said, we might be seeing a change in how teams view goalies. Obviously, the attention goes to the biggest contracts. Jeremy Swayman and Linus Ullmark raised the bar (getting the latter done is a huge win for Ottawa), but don't miss what's happening elsewhere.

On Nov. 23, 2022 — the date of his 12th NHL appearance (including playoffs) — Pyotr Kochetkov signed a four-year, \$8M contract in Carolina. Twenty-six days later, Stuart Skinner was 33 games into his NHL existence when he signed for three years at a \$2.6M AAV in Edmonton. In the last seven weeks, Yaroslav Askarov and Jesper Wallstedt (three games apiece) got \$2M and \$2.2M AAVs, respectively. They are talented young goalies; their teams are wise to bet on them. But those are big numbers and didn't go unnoticed, especially among veteran backups who got hurdled.

2. Joey Daccord followed up with five years, \$25M from Seattle after 69 career games — 50 of them last season, a breakthrough year for him. My immediate reaction is what this means for Philipp Grubauer, who played the Kraken opener, a 3-2 loss to St. Louis. He's got two years remaining at a \$5.9M cap hit, although the actual cash payout is \$1.8M lower. That raises buyout possibilities if the team wishes to go that route.

This is an important season for Seattle, with NBA expansion on the horizon. It's not a coincidence their major free-agent acquisitions — Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson — both have winning pedigrees, big presence on the ice and, especially in Montour's case, off it. The Kraken wish to establish a bolder, more boisterous, identity. Stephenson is there to do the heavy lifting, so Matt Beniers and Shane Wright can spread their offensive wings. Brandon Tanev is a pending unrestricted free agent, and there's interest in him. That's one to watch.

3. Wisely, Toronto is being super-careful with Joseph Woll. He's more than good enough to be a number one, but their biggest risk was his health. I liked their moves on defence and overall plan, bringing in a very competent compadre in Anthony Stolarz. But it hinges on Woll. Bob Gainey had a line: "The problem with injury-prone players is that they tend to get injured." That's what he must avoid. We will see if Dennis Hildeby gets a shot, as the Maple Leafs open with three games in four days. Several observers said last season he was AHL Toronto's best prospect.

4. Sounds like Toronto is working to find a landing spot for Timothy Liljegren. He's down the depth chart, not a situation anyone is happy with.

5. Boone Jenner is soliciting second opinions, but, unfortunately, his stabilizing presence will be missed — his practice injury will keep him out a long time. Loyal to the Blue Jackets, he deserves better. No organization or fanbase deserves brighter days ahead than Columbus.

6. It doesn't make sense to guess timelines for Thatcher Demko. One of the things everyone involved realizes is that whenever his recovery is pushed too far or too hard, it doesn't work. The Lou Lamoriello rule: if you have time, use it. It's the beginning of the season, they have time. Kevin Lankinen and Arturs Silovs are strong enough to stabilize things. If the Canucks can't survive in the short-term with those two, they aren't as good as I think they are.

7. We're days into the season, but writing these while watching post-season baseball has me craving playoffs. So, let's do some guessing. First, Western Conference. Non-playoffs: Anaheim, Calgary, Chicago, San Jose. Bubble teams: six for two spots — Los Angeles, Minnesota, St. Louis, Seattle, Utah, Winnipeg. Suddenly the Hottest Person at School: Nashville. What do they have up their sleeve? Colorado, Vancouver, Vegas. Top of the field: Dallas, Edmonton.

8. Eastern Conference, non-playoffs: Columbus. Bubble teams: eight for one spot: Buffalo, Detroit, Montreal, Islanders, Ottawa (I'm not committed to them), Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington. Playoffs for sure: Boston, Carolina, Tampa Bay, Toronto. Suddenly the Hottest Person at School: New Jersey. Top of the field: Florida, Rangers.

9. Minnesota is on notice, and knows it. As owner Craig Leipold said about Kirill Kaprizov, "Nobody will offer more money than us, or longer. So all we have to do is prove to him that we want to win." He can't extend until July 1, when Zach Parise and Ryan Suter's buyout penalty drops from \$14.7M to \$1.67M. A chunk of that would go to Kaprizov, but the Wild gain flexibility they don't have now. Even better would be wins. Nothing solves problems more than wins. Well, maybe a Scotch (with one big ice cube) and a good cigar. But wins are great, too.

10. There were times during the summer I thought Filip Gustavsson would be dealt, but he starts the season in the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

11. Nino Niederreiter, on Winnipeg's playoff loss to Colorado: "Weird. They were buzzing, everything was clicking, we didn't have an answer. Nothing came naturally, nothing came easy, it was always a battle for something good to happen. We lost patience. (When) scored against, we had to get it back right away. We fell right into their game...tried to play the running game, and they're a powerhouse."

I wondered if there was any chance we might see an eve-of-season extension for Nik Ehlers, since they didn't really engage with Mark Scheifele a year ago until days before he re-signed. This, however, might be an Ehlers decision as much as a Winnipeg one if he's unhappy with his role. Team Canada dark horse: Adam Lowry.

12. Big bit of business for Florida as Carter Verhaeghe, who broke through at age 25, signed for \$56M while the Panthers raised their banner. They are expected to make a run at keeping Sam Bennett, too. He's good for them, and Florida is good for him. He's not a scorer like Verhaeghe, but centres generally get rewarded. In true Bennett fashion, Tuesday night we were talking about him for Team Canada and a smart hockey person texted, "Their management will be concerned he takes crazy penalties." Just as I finished reading that, Bennett was penalized for bowling over Joonas Korpisalo on the Panthers' 6-2 goal.

13. Other interesting UFAs where it seems pretty quiet: Brock Nelson and Shea Theodore. I'm a Nelson fan and he's a big part of that Islanders team. Scoring defenders are always in demand, too. The Golden Knights find ways to do what they want to do.

14. Philadelphia has until the end of October to convince Aleksei Kolosov of its plan for him. That's when he can consider returning to the KHL.

15. Anaheim made big swings in free agency, particularly disappointed they didn't snag Jonathan Marchessault. Claiming James Reimer on waivers is another example of their desire for better results, as it would have been easy to simply wait out John Gibson's appendicitis recovery.

One of the things the Ducks will push this season is making sure their young players gain more important minutes, real exposure to the moments that win or lose games. There is a lot of talented youth in this organization, and the wish is for them to take more control — particularly on defence. New captain Radko Gudas, asked if there was one young blueliner he liked, chickened out and named four of them (Jackson LaCombe, Tristan Luneau, Pavel Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger). Then he laughed, "I see them skating up the ice and say, 'I need that.'"

16. GM Pat Verbeek has two situations to rectify: Gibson and Cam Fowler. The early-season absence is rough for Gibson; he needs to stay healthy and play. Fowler will have interest — it is believed St. Louis took a long look at him — but it might take time for those without cap space. He's a good player who can help a good team. Last I checked, it was quiet on the Trevor Zegras front, so all focus is on starting strongly for him. (Montreal's interest was heavily speculated all last season, but has cooled.)

Interesting hire was Rich Clune, on the bench. Verbeek is serious, as is head coach Greg Cronin — who was working on ways to ease up a bit while still preaching peak performance. Clune, who made a big impact off the ice in Toronto, will help encourage Anaheim's youth.

17. Like the Ducks, Chicago also took some big swings this summer — making googly eyes at Jake Guentzel, who ultimately chose Tampa Bay. (Connor Bedard/Guentzel isn't Tom Holland/Zendaya, but it sure would have been nice to look at.) They found different help for Bedard, and it's a deeper roster. People are really excited to see what he's got in store for 2024-25 now older, wiser and stronger. (Apparently, his 'Q Rating' among young fans is absolutely astronomical.) Connor Ingram spoiled Chicago's chances of ruining Utah's debut with a stellar stretch early in the second period.

18. What other teams see about the Utahns: ownership will not hesitate to make a big splash. With their cap room, if the future Yetis are close, they're going to be aggressive. Excellent opening night, completed with a "W." Something to WATCH: Mikhail Sergachev on the Blackhawks' first goal.

Mikhail Sergachev misses a check on Connor Bedard at the blue line.

During the broadcast, Luke Gazdic pointed at Cedric Pare/Patrik Laine as a good reason Sergachev pulled back from contact with Connor Bedard, but we also wondered if the defenceman's own terrible leg injury played a role, too — that he was being careful not to injure himself.

19. We're going to know about Los Angeles right away. Drew Doughty is expected to be out around three months; the Kings start seven straight on the road without their defensive security blanket. Getting home relatively unscathed will be a massive confidence boost. Brandt Clarke has the gifts and you can see the confidence. He wants the puck, and is excited to run the power play.

"Funnel pucks to the net and keep it moving," he said. He also praised Adrian Kempe, saying the talented winger has "a wide area where you can put the puck and he can still shoot it." Meanwhile, Quinton Byfield is ready to explode. He looked phenomenal in the pre-season and their depth chart looks ridiculous when Foegele-Byfield-Fiala is listed as the third line. The Kings hope he pushes Anze Kopitar for top-line minutes, and it is not an impossibility.

Los Angeles is very disciplined system-wise, but wasn't considered overly physical or intimidating. That's why they went after Tanner Jeannot, who is much better than he showed in Tampa Bay. Big season for a lot of their prospects, with Jordan Spence, Akil Thomas and Alex Turcotte all getting opportunities to show something.

20. Everyone knew, after St. Louis missed the playoffs, that Doug Armstrong was tired of losing. “It was disappointing for all of us,” Robert Thomas said. “We knew there’s no option to miss again. That was his mindset. And as players, we are ready to respond.” Thomas, by the way, said his goal is 100 points (career-high is 86) while being better defensively. Armstrong’s boldest move paid immediate dividends, as Dylan Holloway set up Philip Broberg for the tying goal during St. Louis’s opening-night 3-2 win in Seattle — also a victory for offer-sheet enthusiasts.

21. Things are already better in San Jose with a lottery win; two top prospects (Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith) in the lineup. William Eklund and Fabian Zetterlund made immediate texts to Celebrini once he became a Shark. “He has so much skill,” Zetterlund said. “Great fit in this organization. Perfect timing too.”

“He’s both a passer and a shooter,” Eklund added. (When I didn’t specifically ask about Smith, Zetterlund made a point of saying, “Will Smith is going to be good for us.”) It’s clear there was an “add-talent” mandate to convince Celebrini to make the NHL leap, which he did. Who is he looking forward to facing? “Nathan MacKinnon,” he answered, and in a complimentary, not cocky, way. “He’s a dog out there.”

Celebrini’s been around the Golden State Warriors during their decade atop the NBA. What has he learned from them? “It’s all the work you put in, your dedication to winning and doing all the little things that add up. All those lessons have stuck with me. Doing things right. The quality the first time around so you don’t make any mistakes.” Anything specific from Steph Curry? “How dedicated he is. How much attention to detail he has in his training. How he’ll be in the gym for six hours and just keep working no matter what.”

22. One of the things that really stuck with me was hearing Zetterlund talk about handling all of last season’s misery. “It’s a long run,” he said. “Don’t focus too much on the losing. Look forward, wake up every morning with a smile and go to work. Don’t make excuses about anything. We talk about, ‘We are going to change things in San Jose.’ We want to be here when it’s better. Focus on being positive, work to get better. Driving (hard) every day. Be the best in practice. Hope it is contagious.”

“We know this is going to turn around eventually,” Eklund said. “Love to win and hate to lose.” One thing the Sharks showed in the pre-season: no one is going to bully their youth without pushback. It’s a long road back to what the Sharks were for almost 20 years, but losing 20-3 in back-to-back games will not be tolerated. Zetterlund, by the way, had a great line about what he’d change in the NHL: “No practices, just games.”

23. Nice story: Dylan McIlrath. Tenth overall selection in 2010 made an opening-night roster (Washington’s), the first time he’d done that since 2017. Now 32, he’s won three Calder Cups (2017 Grand Rapids, 2023 and ’24 Hershey).

24. Awards. Hart: I could be boring and pick Connor McDavid — no one will be surprised if he wins again — but what’s fun about taking the easy route? Chris Pronger is the only defenceman to claim this trophy in the past 52 years, and Quinn Hughes is going to make a run at joining him. He’s a great talent with a desire to be even better, a captain in one of the league’s most intense markets. Hughes skated this summer with Roman Josi and learned something important from Nashville’s leader.

“He talks a lot about acceptance,” Hughes said. “Things happen the way they do, plays happen the way they do. Good things, bad things and accepting everything that comes towards you. That’s a good gift. And I think I sometimes do a good job at it as well.” Quinn’s calm is a key for both his play and his dressing-room presence. Vancouver’s contention window is open, and he’s a massive part of it.

25. Calder: This might be the best race. Celebrini, Cutter Gauthier, Lane Hutson, Rutger McGroarty, Matvei Michkov, Logan Stankoven and Dustin Wolf all deserve confetti from the pre-season hype machine. A few people I talk to really like Stankoven because he's played 43 games — 19 in the playoffs — getting a true taste of NHL life. Canadiens players rave about what Hutson does in practice, and Gauthier can score, always sexy to voters.

I don't professionally wager, but if I did, I'd go Michkov. He's a first-overall-level selection who fell because of uncertainty, and there was nothing during pre-season that indicated he's going to have a hard time making a North American transition. Can't remember who told me this, but, years ago, one coach said he doesn't worry about language barriers or cultural barriers if someone "talks hockey." Even if simply pointing or waving or physically demonstrating things, you can bridge language gaps in the short term. We've definitely seen that with Michkov, in games and in practice. Plus, he's going to have a big role on a highly watched team. That doesn't hurt.

26. Vezina: Last season was clear-cut Connor Hellebuyck, who received 31 of 32 first-place votes and ran away with it. If Ottawa makes the playoffs, there will be serious momentum for Linus Ullmark. He'd be tough to beat in that scenario. But my pre-season pick is Shesterkin, the 2022 winner. If he wants to be paid big, he has to play big.

27. Adams: Patrick Roy is at the top of the list of people I learn from. His passion, his knowledge, his hatred of losing, his eye for the game, his incredible self-confidence, how much he demands of himself. The way Roy left Colorado's bench kept him on the outside a long time. All that does is motivate him to prove everyone wrong, and make sure absolutely nothing is overlooked in efforts to push the Islanders into contention. Out of his first Long Island training camp, we've already seen a thunderbolt through the roster with Pierre Engvall put on waivers. On the podcast, I didn't pick the Islanders to make the playoffs, which would damage any Coach of the Year candidacy. But predictions are for tarot-card readers, not hockey players.

There are coaches who are motivators, there are coaches who are good at Xs-and-Os. It is hard to be good at both. "He brought me in right away and went over one or two of my games," Bo Horvat said last month. "Just him and I chatting. He's like, 'If you do this certain thing and change that in your game, it's going to help you down the road.' Trying to make small adjustments like that for me. He's always looking to push guys to get better. That's great for everybody on your team." What did he tell you? "For a centreman, you always want to be under the puck and come up as a unit. Sometimes I might get too far ahead...maybe cheat a little bit on the offence. For me to make sure the puck's out of the zone first and supporting my wingers is going to be huge for me."

It's not revelatory, but Roy makes the Islanders believe. If you don't believe, you're doomed before you begin.

28. Panthers CEO Matt Caldwell said on the team's TV broadcast Tuesday night that the organization's original season-ticket holders would receive a replica Stanley Cup ring. I love when teams do that. Great touch. Staff got them, too, including part-timers.

29. Prayers for the great hockey fans and people of Florida, in the path of Hurricane Milton. Stay safe, listen to the right advice.