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Columbus Blue Jackets

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Columbus Dispatch / Help for injury-plagued Columbus Blue Jackets is coming with Jenner, Marchenko and Fabbro

By Brian Hedger- February 22, 2025

Dean Evason is about to get three familiar faces back in the Blue Jackets' lineup Saturday against the Chicago Blackhawks.

Captain Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery) and Kirill Marchenko (fractured jaw) are expected to return to the Jackets' forward lines while defenseman Dante Fabbro (concussion) will return to the top defensive pairing to play with Zach Werenski, who's coming off a stinging overtime loss to Canada on Thursday in the championship of the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament.

After leading the tournament in scoring with six points for the United States on six assists, it's time for Werenski to focus on a different red, white and blue team.

"We'll talk to him here today," Evason said Friday. "And, as I (said) before, he can do whatever he wants ... as long as he gets on the ice (Saturday) night."

The Blue Jackets activated Jenner and Marchenko off injured reserve Friday, while Fabbro will return without needing roster activation. Friday wasn't all good on the injury front, though. The Blue Jackets also added depth forward Kevin Labanc to the IR following a season-ending shoulder surgery and ruled AHL Cleveland forward Owen Sillinger out for the rest of the season with a knee injury.

Joe Labate, a professional journeyman forward who played last season in Russia's KHL, was recalled Thursday from Cleveland and will make his Blue Jackets debut on the fourth line against Chicago in his first NHL action since March 28, 2017 with the Vancouver Canucks.

As for Jenner, the Blue Jackets' captain will make his season debut by playing Saturday. He's been out since injuring his shoulder in a preseason practice and undergoing surgery in early October.

This week, Jenner skated at left wing on a second line featuring center Cole Sillinger – Owen's younger brother – and Kent Johnson. It will be the first chance Evason has to send Jenner into a game that counts.

"He's a fantastic pro, right"? Evason said. "So, to be on the bench with him is going to be exciting, to call his name will be awesome and ... he's not just, all of a sudden, going to come in and lead us. He's been in our room the entire time, and he's had an effect and a presence in there right from Day 1. It's clearly going to be an easy transition for him to step back in, right away, and lead this team on and off the ice."

Marchenko will be wearing a protective plastic shield attached to his helmet and visor upon his return, but the fact he's expected to play at all is remarkable. Not all jaw fractures are the same, but often that type of injury sidelines players for six weeks or more. It's been roughly three weeks since he was struck in the jaw by a puck while sitting on the bench in Dallas, where he needed surgery a day later to repair the damage.

During practice Friday, Marchenko looked like himself on the ice while scoring a beautiful goal with a one-timer during work with the Jackets' top power play group.

"It says something about doctors and trainers and what the guys are doing, as far as strength guys, too," Evason said. "We're all support people and the players need some support to get on the ice after injuries, but ultimately ... everybody's different. Everybody comes off injuries differently, but to have 'Marchy' a possibility for (Saturday) is exciting for us."

Marchenko, the Jackets' second-leading scorer behind Werenski, skated in his usual roles at this week's practices. He worked on the right wing with the top forward line, pairing with center Adam Fantilli and left wing Dmitri Voronkov, and manned the left wing for the top power play unit.

Fabbro, also injured Feb. 2 in Dallas, skated on the right side of the top defensive pairing in his return to practices this week. He'll pair with Werenski, whose vacant spot on the left side of that pairing was temporarily handled by Jack Johnson.

Assuming all three return to the Blue Jackets' lineup Saturday against the Blackhawks, it should provide a needed boost in both talent and morale heading into the season's final stretch with Columbus just one point outside a playoff spot.

"Each game's a big one for us," Jenner said. "It's super tight right now as it stands, and it's only going to be tighter and tighter, and these games will mean more and more, as you come down the stretch. The job the guys have done to get ourselves in this position has been outstanding, and it's going to take more from all of us to get where we want to be by the end of the regular season."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets, Chicago Blackhawks fans sing happy birthday to Johnny Gaudreau's son

By Brian Hedger- February 23, 2025

Fans of the Blue Jackets and Chicago Blackhawks got a touching surprise with their game tickets Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

During a stoppage midway through the first period, fans were told about Johnny Gaudreau's son celebrating his first birthday as the arena's video board cut to a shot of him and his mom, Meredith, watching the game along with other family members.

Fans were asked to sing happy birthday to "Baby Johnny," and the entire arena happily obliged for the youngest of Johnny Gaudreau's two kids. It's been almost six months since Johnny Gaudreau was killed along with his brother, Matthew, while riding bicycles near their home in Salem County, New Jersey.

The stoppage began with an acknowledgement of Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski's performance as the tournament scoring leader with six points on six assists for the United States at the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament, which concluded Thursday with Canada topping the U.S. in a thrilling championship game that concluded in overtime at TD Garden in Boston.

Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey was displayed inside the U.S. locker room for the entire tournament, was awarded to the team's player of the game after wins and was worn by honorary captain Mike Eruzione prior to the championship game. A "Johnny Hockey!" chant also rung throughout the arena during the championship game courtesy of U.S. fans looking to give the hosts a boost.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets rout Chicago Blackhawks, 5-1, in return from NHL winter break

By Brian Hedger- February 23, 2025

It looked like a game between hockey teams that hadn't played in two weeks, but the Blue Jackets got exactly what they needed Saturday night at sold-out Nationwide Arena.

Paced by Zach Werenski's three points on a goal and two assists plus Kent Johnson's two goals, the Blue Jackets downed the Chicago Blackhawks 5-1 in front of 18,809 to return victorious from the NHL's midseason pause for the 4 Nations Face-Off. Adam Fantilli and rookie Denton Mateychuk added goals in the victory, which pulled the Blue Jackets (27-22-8) even at 62 points with the Detroit Red Wings and Ottawa Senators in a battle for the two wild cards in the Eastern Conference.

Elvis Merzlikins earned the goaltending win with 27 saves, while Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner made his season debut by returning from shoulder surgery. Kirill Marchenko also returned from a fractured jaw and defenseman Dante Fabbro played his first game after being sidelined prior to the break with a concussion.

The Blue Jackets, Red Wings and Senators are all one point ahead of the Boston Bruins in a tight race for the East's two wild cards. Detroit and Ottawa have those prized positions via tiebreakers now, but the Blue Jackets are right there with 25 games remaining.

"With the spot we're in right now, points are important," Werenski said. "I feel like we had a good first period, kind of lost ourselves in the second and got ourselves (back) in the third. I'm just happy with the two points, but if we're going to get to where we want to go, we have to play better than tonight. It's important we got two points, but it's important we play better moving forward."

Werenski played two days after becoming just the third defenseman to ever lead an NHL international tournament in scoring with six points on six assists for the United States in the 4 Nations Face-Off, joining Canada's Bobby Orr and Denis Potvin in the 1976 Canada Cup. He made more history with his first of two assists on Johnson's goals, pushing a home point streak to 22 straight games to tie Phil Housley for the third-longest streak of that kind by an NHL defenseman.

Werenski's streak trails only Orr's 25-game streak for the Boston Bruins in 1974-75 and Paul Coffey's 23-game streak in 1985-86 for the Edmonton Oilers. After assisting Johnson's goals, which gave the Jackets a 2-0 lead, Werenski netted his 18th goal of the season on a breakaway in the third to make it 4-1 less than a minute before Fantilli's 16th goal made it 5-1 with 5:16 left.

Craig Smith scored the lone goal for the Blackhawks (17-32-7), who started goalie Petr Mrazek. After getting a day off Sunday, the Blue Jackets return to practice Monday for a tough home matchup Tuesday against the Dallas Stars. They'll also play the Red Wings on Thursday in Detroit before a rematch Saturday at Ohio Stadium in the 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series game.

"Points are so important right now with just over a month and a half left in the season," Werenski said.

"We're battling with (Detroit), we're battling with Ottawa (and) the (New York Rangers). It's fun to look at it, right? We're in a great spot and we haven't been in this spot in a long time. We should enjoy it, we should embrace it and we should know what's in front of us. I'm the guy who looks at it. I know some guys don't, but it's good to know where we stand in the standings."

Columbus Dispatch / 4 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets win over Chicago Blackhawks: More Werenski magic

By Brian Hedger- February 24, 2025

It wasn't always pretty, but the Blue Jackets' 5-1 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday night at Nationwide Arena still provided some beautiful memories.

The Jackets resumed what's already been a special hockey season in Columbus with a strong start and finish to a game they needed to win to keep pace in a tightly packed playoff race in the Eastern Conference. Here are four takeaways:

Zach Werenski picks up where he left off for Columbus Blue Jackets

The sting of the United States' 3-2 overtime loss to Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off championship game Thursday was impossible to miss when Zach Werenski met with reporters two days later. He was mostly stone-faced, gave eloquent thoughts through monotone words and looked a bit spent emotionally after spending two weeks excelling in a tournament he described as, "the most fun I've had playing hockey."

Never overstate the power of a good nap, though.

After a marathon afternoon snooze, Werenski returned to a sold-out arena and did what he's done for the Blue Jackets all season. Despite assessing his game as, "a little sloppy," Werenski increased his team-high scoring total to 62 points with his 18th goal plus two assists on goals by Kent Johnson.

Werenski's first assist extended his franchise-record home point streak to 22 games, moving him into a tie with Phil Housley (1991-92) for the third-longest such streak by an NHL defenseman. His breakaway goal in the third broke the game open by giving Columbus a 4-1 lead. After collecting the puck, Werenski skated by his former defensive partner Seth Jones.

He finished the play with a quick deke to a forehand wrist shot that cleanly beat goalie Petr Mrazek.

"(I spent) a lot of energy the last couple weeks," Werenski said. "I slept good (Friday) night, and I napped hard (Saturday). I napped forever it felt like, but we're in a good spot here (for a playoff chase), so once I got to the rink, I was ready to go, and I dialed in."

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Kent Johnson energized after NHL break

Johnson put only two shots on net, but both beat Mrazek for Johnson's 18th and 19th goals of the season. The first was scored 5-on-5 and the second capped a power play for a 2-0 lead early in the second period.

The goals were also Johnson's 37th and 38th points in 43 games, moving him within two of tying his career-high of 40 points in 79 games two years ago as a rookie. Johnson skated with Cole Sillinger and Boone Jenner in the Blue Jackets captain's season debut, and they showed some chemistry despite committing a couple of turnovers that made coach Dean Evason wince.

Johnson's goals set new single-season highs for him and put the high-skill right wing on pace for 30 goals in 68 games after missing 14 games early with a shoulder injury. Johnson's line was also matched up quite a bit against young Blackhawks star Connor Bedard, who's one of his closest friends.

"I love it," Johnson said. "I was hoping for the matchup. I don't think it was every shift, but we definitely had it a lot. It was fun. I love playing against him. Obviously, it's a tough challenge, but it was good."

Elvis Merzlikins impresses during interesting night in Columbus Blue Jackets' net

Elvis Merzlikins is emerging as one of the Blue Jackets' most consistent players, which is exactly what they've needed him to be while multiple key players missed time with injuries.

Jenner (shoulder), Kirill Marchenko (jaw) and Dante Fabbro (concussion) all returned to action Saturday night and Merzlikins just continued his solid play with a 27-save performance for the goaltending win.

It didn't happen without some classic Merzlikins moments, including a decision to skate far out of his net to play a loose puck followed by a scramble late in the third that left his backside cold and stinging. Playing the puck near the Blue Jackets' bench required a race to get to it ahead of a Blackhawks player, which led to Merzlikins making a leaping catch like a baseball player at the outfield wall.

His run-in with a goal post during the scramble in the third happened with the Blackhawks pressing while down two goals. Justin Danforth landed on top of his own sprawled goalie in the Blue Jackets' crease, which left Merzlikins in some pain after getting up.

"I've got to go check with the doctors, but I felt my neck and then I got the post in my butt," Merzlikins said, laughing. "It didn't feel good. I'll tell you that. I literally felt the post between my cheeks, so ... it didn't feel good. It was cold, as well, so it wasn't good. It hurt. It honestly hurt. It's a weird question (to answer), but I'm honest."

Johnny Gaudreau's wife, Meredith, attended the game along with their two young children, Noa and Johnny. The young Johnny Gaudreau celebrated his first birthday Saturday, which the Blue Jackets had a sellout crowd of 18,809 help the family celebrate with a touching rendition of "Happy Birthday" sung to him during a TV stoppage in the first period.

The young Gaudreau was held aloft by a family member as the crowd sang the words, filling the arena with emotion and quite a few tears.

It's been almost six months since Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau was killed along with his brother, Matthew, when they were struck by a vehicle as they rode bicycles together Aug. 29 in Salem County, New Jersey. Many tributes and memorials have since followed, including one Saturday that made a packed house sing in unison. It was a special, touching moment.

"We weren't working," Evason said of the Blue Jackets' bench during that stoppage. "We were watching. Hard not to lose your composure, but way more happy thoughts. We've talked about our crowd and our fans, and it's just incredible. Obviously, for the organization, but for the fans to recognize and do that, it was very special. To see Meredith and her kids, it was hard to see her. It was emotional, but I think she felt the happiness that we all did, as well."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: James van Riemsdyk is the NHL's top outdoorsman

By Aaron Portzline- February 24, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: The outdoorsman

James van Riemsdyk insists he didn't have an ulterior motive when he signed a free-agent contract with the Blue Jackets late last summer. GM Don Waddell laughed when asked if the big event coming on Saturday impacted his decision to sign van Riemsdyk.

But van Riemsdyk seems magnetically drawn to the NHL's outdoor games. On Saturday, when the Blue Jackets host the Detroit Red Wings in the Stadium Series at Ohio Stadium, van Riemsdyk will be playing in his eighth outdoor game, more than any other NHL player.

"A lot of dumb luck in that," van Riemsdyk told The Athletic this week. "Maybe more than anything, it's playing in two of the bigger markets (Toronto and Philadelphia) because it's the big markets that tend to get these games.

"It's a cool thing. Kinda random. But it's something really cool to look back on when I'm done playing."

Van Riemsdyk, who has 3-3-6 in seven roofless games, has played in some legendary venues: Boston's Fenway Park, the University of Michigan's Michigan Stadium, the U.S. Navy's Memorial Stadium and even at a resort in Lake Tahoe.

After Saturday's game in the iconic home for Ohio State football, van Riemsdyk will have a two-game lead on some of the NHL's most famous players: Sidney Crosby, Patrick Kane, Duncan Keith, Evgeni Malkin, Brandon Saad, Brent Seabrook and Jonathan Toews, who have played six games each.

He's learned a few things along the way, too, he said. For instance ...

- Football stadiums are better than baseball stadiums. "The shape of the layout makes the atmosphere, and the layout is better in football stadiums."
- It's wise for players to put somebody else in charge of tickets, lodging, etc. because family and friends tend to flock to these events. "You can get totally overwhelmed."
- It's "way more fun if you win."

Van Riemsdyk said the outdoor practice the day before the game is key to getting acclimated to the surroundings and the temperature. The fact Saturday's game is set for puck drop at 6:30 p.m. will help players immensely, he said, "because the sun can be tough to navigate."

The Athletic spent a few minutes last week with van Riemsdyk, jarring his memory for each of the outdoor games he's played.

Jan. 1, 2010, Winter Classic

Flyers vs. Bruins

Summary: Van Riemsdyk was a rookie with the Flyers when the NHL's third Winter Classic was staged at the home of MLB's Boston Red Sox. He had no points and played 12:47 in the Flyers' 2-1 loss to the Bruins.

In his words: "It was my first season, so everything was exciting and new, everything was great. I was trying to establish myself, just hoping I could stick around for that game and be up the whole year. I had a lot of buddies who were in college around Boston and they all came to the game. Stepping into Fenway ... it was almost like a religious place. That seems like forever ago now."

Jan. 2, 2012, Winter Classic

Rangers vs. Flyers

Summary: He missed almost half the season with injury, but van Riemsdyk played in the Flyers' second outdoor game, a 3-2 loss at Citizens Bank Park, home of the Philadelphia Phillies. He was scoreless and had a minus-1 rating in 13:28 of ice time.

In his words: "Being in Philly and knowing how Philly loves their teams, there was a great energy to it. That was a blast. That was played during the day, and I think the game was delayed a bit with weather stuff."

James van Riemsdyk controls the puck in front of Tomas Tatar during the

Maple Leafs vs. Red Wings

Summary: Now playing for Toronto, this was one of the best days of van Riemsdyk's career. (He'll explain.) He scored a goal, had a plus-1 rating, played 19:14 and had an unsuccessful shootout attempt in the Leafs' 3-2 shootout win. It was staged at the "Big House," Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, Mich., home to college football's Michigan Wolverines.

In his words: "I found out I made the (U.S.) Olympic team during the practice the day before the game. They were going to announce it after the game, but I got the heads up from one of the media guys. That was a big goal for me, so I was so happy. Then I had my first goal in an outdoor game — I whacked at it, it went up in the air and I batted it out of the air — and we won for the first time. So, yeah, big game."

Jan. 1, 2017, Centennial Classic

Red Wings vs. Maple Leafs

Summary: A rematch of the Winter Classic three years earlier. Van Riemsdyk had an assist and an even rating and played 14:01 in the Leafs' 5-4 overtime win at BMO Field in Exhibition Place, home to the CFL's Toronto Argonauts and MLS's Toronto FC.

In his words: "It being in Toronto, with all of the support around there, it was amazing. There were a lot of Leafs legends around. I wore the same number (21) as Borje Salming, and when his number was retired, I switched to 25. But it was cool to have a moment to chat with him. Obviously, he was a great player and a really important player in this game. He was a super gracious guy, too."

March 3, 2018, Stadium Series

Maple Leafs vs. Capitals

Summary: The game, a 5-2 win by Washington, was played at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., in the stadium (Navy Corps Memorial Stadium) that typically houses the Midshipmen during college football season. "Anchors Aweigh" blared throughout.

In his words: "That was a very intimate setting. That was cool. The town itself was pretty neat. That's honestly my best memory from that. We got smacked around pretty good."

Feb. 23, 2019, Stadium Series

Penguins vs. Flyers

Summary: Down 3-1 with barely three minutes remaining, van Riemsdyk scored a power-play goal that started a comeback and led the Flyers past the rival Penguins 4-3 in overtime.

In his words: "That whole year was a frustrating year in general, both for the team and individually. Things just didn't feel like a good fit, and there were some frustrations for me coming into that game. There was a picture of me having an animated discussion with (coach Peter Laviolette) at the practice a day before the game, so I knew I needed to have a good response and play well. It was a wild game. (Travis) Konecny was going after (Evgeni) Malkin. Wayne Simmonds plastered somebody. There was no love lost, and that added a cool element to it."

Feb. 21, 2021, NHL Outdoors

Flyers vs. Bruins

Summary: This was van Riemsdyk's best outdoor game to date. He had a goal and two assists, playing a role in all three of the Flyers' goals in a 7-3 loss to Boston. The game was played at the pricey and picturesque Edgewood Tahoe Resort in Stateline, Nev.

In his words: "I just remember (laughs) how long it took us to get there. We had a long bus ride from the airport. There were no fans there (because of COVID-19). It was a pretty cool atmosphere, a beautiful setting. I remember us going for a plunge in the water (after practice). It was like taking an ice bath. We got smacked in the game, though. It really wasn't much of a game."

Item No. 2: "John-ny Hock-ey!"

There were two moments late last week in which the hockey world showed the best of itself, not only remembering former Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau but also celebrating his legacy.

On Thursday in Boston, during the 4 Nations Face-Off final between the U.S. and Canada, fans in TD Garden let loose with chants of "John-ny Hock-ey!" They were especially loud in the third period when the two nations were playing their way toward overtime.

"He would have been on that team, in my opinion," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "There were so many moments when I was thinking about him (during that game), and that just really made it special. You think about him and his family a lot in moments like that."

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason, a proud Canadian, said it gave him chills.

"From (USA hockey legend) Mike Eruzione wearing the Gaudreau jersey (for the ceremonial puck drop) and the crowd ... we all got a little choked up, at least I did sitting on my couch," Evason said. "I think other people did, too. Johnny didn't just affect Americans or just hockey people. He had a presence in the world, right? We certainly saw that (on Thursday)."

Gaudreau's wife, Meredith, continues to call Columbus home, and Blue Jackets players have continued to keep her close. There are frequent visits on off days and after practice, especially from Sean Monahan, who has routinely brought his kids down the street so the families can hang out. (Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell said Meredith and the family will be part of Saturday's outdoor game, too.)

That leads us to a beautiful moment during Saturday's game against the Chicago Blackhawks, which Meredith and the two kids attended with other family members. They sat in the lower bowl, surrounded by Blue Jackets fans.

And were they ever surrounded. It was Johnny Gaudreau Jr.'s first birthday, and a sold-out crowd in Nationwide Arena serenaded the little guy with a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday."

Join us in wishing a very special boy a very special 1st birthday!

Happy birthday, Baby Johnny ♡ pic.twitter.com/nKYaKq94V1

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) February 23, 2025

Item No. 3: Werenski's big stage

The global hockey world had a two-week look at what Columbus fans have seen all season: Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski was his silky-smooth self for the United States, totaling 0-6-6 in four games and leading the tournament in points.

While Werenski was starring on the big stage, his Blue Jackets coaches and teammates were watching intently throughout the break. Even those from Canada, who lost to the U.S. in the preliminary round before beating them in the title game, were cheering for Werenski.

"Watching him play in that setting and at that level," Evason said. "It was just what we've seen from him here all season. I was watching from home, but it was honestly like standing on the bench (in Nationwide Arena) watching him."

Werenski was beyond excited to represent the U.S. and over the moon to be playing in the NHL's first best-on-best tournament in almost a decade. But he acknowledged that it was also an opportunity to elevate his status on a bigger stage than he gets playing for the Blue Jackets.

No question, Werenski is anticipated by most to be a finalist for the Norris Trophy, given to the NHL's top defenseman.

"It was great to see 'Z' play like he played in that really intense setting," Jenner said. "I think he's the best defenseman in the league, and he showed that."

Werenski said Thursday's final vs. Canada was "the most fun hockey game I've ever played in," and the whole experience seemed to be more than he could have even expected. But he never lost contact with his Columbus teammates during the almost two weeks away.

"We're a close group in here," Werenski said. "I talked to quite a few guys throughout the tournament, and I always got the sense that guys were rooting for me. I understand country pride, and guys are going to root for where they're from, but it was nice to have the support."

"That's really all I care about, the guys in (this dressing room) and this organization. I wanted to win for the U.S., of course, but at the same time, I wanted to make this team proud and show what guys from Columbus can do. I think I did that."

Item No. 4: Snacks

- Perhaps this section of the weekly notes should be called "Zachs" instead of "Snacks." After Saturday's three-point game, Werenski has 18-44-62 in 56 games, putting him on pace for 90 points, which would top Artemi Panarin's franchise mark of 87 points in a season. However, another franchise mark is much more in the crosshairs for Werenski: His two assists on Saturday put him at 256 in his career, leaving him only two short of matching Rick Nash's franchise record with the Blue Jackets.

- And then there's this: Werenski has now scored at least a point in 22 straight home games, the third-longest point streak by a defenseman in NHL history. Only Bobby Orr (25 games in 1974-75) and Paul Coffey (23 games in 1985-86) have had longer strings. If he keeps going — the Jackets host Dallas on Tuesday, then play in Detroit on Thursday — he can pull within one game of Orr's record during Saturday's outdoor game. (Yes, we checked with the NHL: That will count as a CBJ home game.) During that point streak, Werenski has 14-27-41 and a plus-23 rating.

- Jenner understandably drew a large media contingent on Saturday morning toward his locker stall after it was confirmed he was set to make his season debut later that night against the Blackhawks. And quietly, on two other sides of the dressing room, were more positive signs. Monahan, who has been out since suffering a wrist injury on Jan. 7, was peeling off his gear following his latest solo skate. And veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson was drenched in sweat after joining the Jackets for an optional morning skate, his first full wheel with his teammates. Timelines are not clear yet for Monahan or Gudbranson, but these are big steps forward.

- Nothing new to report on Yegor Chinakhov, who has been out since late November with a back injury. He hasn't skated since the Blue Jackets returned from the long layoff on Wednesday.

go-deeper

GO DEEPER

Blackhawks' Seth Jones seeking trade to play 'meaningful' games

- It was reported in Chicago this week that defenseman Seth Jones and the Blackhawks were “exploring trade possibilities” midway through Jones’ fourth season in Chicago. He was traded there, of course, by the Blue Jackets in the summer of 2021 when Jones made it clear with then-GM Jarmo Kekäläinen that he was unlikely to sign an extension with the Jackets when his contract expired a year later. Jones thought two of his main objectives — playing for a winning franchise and playing in a major market — would be realized in Chicago, but it hasn't been a happy marriage. So what now? The Blue Jackets have massive cap room — Jones has five years remaining at \$9.5 million — and Jones and Werenski have remained extremely close after spending most of five seasons together as one of the NHL's top pairs. It's a move that could make sense, especially if Chicago is willing to eat a portion of Jones' salary.

- Here's Werenski on the topic Saturday: “Obviously, I'd be open to it. I loved playing with him. He's probably my best friend in hockey. Whatever he's dealing with there (in Chicago), I hope it works out.” Werenski and Jones had dinner together in Columbus on Friday, Werenski said.

go-deeper

GO DEEPER

Seth Jones trade WATCH: Tiering potential destinations for the Blackhawks' defenseman

- Winger Joe LaBate, a surprise recall from AHL Cleveland on Friday, made his Columbus debut on Saturday against Chicago. It was his first NHL game since he dressed for Vancouver on March 28, 2017. “I was super emotional (when I got the call),” LaBate said. “It was incredible. It's been a long journey. That's probably the best phone call I've ever gotten.” LaBate said he immediately called his fiancée, Clara, who was vacationing in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. “She got really emotional, too,” LaBate said. “That was a really cool part of it, because she's the best. She's believed in me every step.” Clara gave up her final two days in Mexico to fly back to Ohio to see LaBate play on Saturday.

- LaBate, 31, played last season in Russia's KHL. He hit the NHL market this summer, but the best he could do was a tryout agreement with AHL Cleveland. That quickly turned into a two-way contract earlier this season. Still, it was a surprise to many that the Blue Jackets left center Luca Del Bel Belluz and winger Mikael Pyhtia in the minors after they were sent down to keep playing during the 4 Nations break. Blue Jackets assistant GM Chris Clark, who runs the Cleveland roster, said LaBate's recall wasn't a reflection on the play of Del Bel Belluz or Pyhtia, they just wanted to see LaBate, especially before recalls are limited after the March 7 trade deadline to only four the rest of the season.

- This week's Sunday Gathering trivia question: The Blue Jackets have five players on pace to score 20 or more goals this season. Kirill Marchenko is already there (21), Kent Johnson and Dmitry Voronkov (19) are on the doorstep, and Werenski (18) and Adam Fantilli (16) are closing in. (Monahan, if he returns in time, could get there, too. He has 14.) The five 20-goal scorers would match the 2018-19 team for the most in a season. Name the five players who hit 20 goals that season.
- The Ohio State men's hockey team hosts Michigan on Thursday and Friday in Value City Arena. Asked why one or both of those games couldn't have been played in Ohio Stadium before the Blue Jackets-Red Wings Saturday matchup, Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork said it was the NHL's demand that their game — Columbus vs. Detroit — be the first game staged on the temporary ice sheet. "They have very strict protocols," Bjork said. "The games we had at Wrigley Field (earlier this season) for our men's and women's teams, that was after the NHL game (St. Louis vs. Chicago in the Winter Classic) was played. To protect their rights — they're renting (Ohio Stadium) from us — it's their stadium until after that game is played, so there wasn't really an opportunity to do that."
- Bjork did say, however, that Ohio State is using this Stadium Series game as a learning experience with the hope of staging their own outdoor games for the men's and women's programs in the future. "That's our goal," he said. "This obviously gives us a great template. We would not have the NHL run it. It would be nice to have their infrastructure, because they know how to do this. But we'll use this as a template, a guide, to say, 'Can we pull this off?'"
- The Blue Jackets announced this week that forward Kevin Labanc would miss the rest of the season following a shoulder injury. In 34 games, he had 2-10-12 and a plus-1 rating. He's an unrestricted free agent this summer.
- Tough break for Cleveland forward Owen Sillinger, who made his NHL debut earlier this season and hoped to one day soon play in the NHL game with his younger brother, Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger. On Thursday, Owen is having knee surgery in Cleveland to repair a ligament tear, which will end his season. He's an unrestricted free agent this summer.
- Trivia answer: The five players to score 20-plus goals in 2018-19 were Cam Atkinson (41), Panarin (28), Pierre-Luc Dubois and Josh Anderson (27) and Oliver Bjorkstrand (23).

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski resumes red-hot play, production after 4 Nations Face-Off

By Aaron Portzline- February 24, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Late Thursday, Zach Werenski and Team USA suffered a heartbreaking overtime loss to Canada in the final of the 4 Nations Face-Off, an unexpectedly intense and competitive in-season tournament that captured the interest of fans far beyond the hockey world.

Friday, he flew back to Columbus. Saturday, he was back with the Columbus Blue Jackets, getting acclimated to his regular day job as the driving force behind the upstart Blue Jackets' season.

Werenski acknowledged being tired Saturday when the Blue Jackets resumed their unlikely playoff push by hosting the Chicago Blackhawks in Nationwide Arena, and he specified that his fatigue was more mental than physical.

But you never could have guessed it.

Werenski had a 3-point game, including a length-of-the-ice breakaway goal late in the third period, to lead the Blue Jackets to a 5-1 win over the Blackhawks before a beyond-capacity crowd of 18,809 in Nationwide Arena.

"Yes, impressed. One hundred percent," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Shocked? No.

"He's just such an incredible athlete, right? All the emotions he's gone through the last three days ... such great highs, and a big low (Thursday's loss), and he just slides back in and goes about his business. He helps his team have success here tonight. Extremely impressed."

Kent Johnson added two goals, and Denton Mateychuk and Adam Fantilli also scored for the Blue Jackets, who stumbled into the lengthy break on a four-game (0-3-1) losing streak. Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov also had two assists for the Blue Jackets, and goaltender Elvis Merzlikins had 27 saves.

Werenski, who assisted on both of Johnson's goals, is up to 18-44-62 in 56 games. Saturday marked his fifth game with 3 or more points this season, and it extended his home point streak to 22 games, tied for the third longest in NHL history among defensemen.

Only Bobby Orr (25 games, 1974-75) and Paul Coffey (23 games, 1985-86) have had longer streaks than Werenski's run.

Z ON THE BREAKAWAY!!!! @FanaticsBook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/eKhY484F9W

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) February 23, 2025

"I was a little tired. I was a little sloppy," Werenski said. "I could have played better in a couple of areas.

"The last two weeks I was pretty focused, spent a lot of mental energy the last couple of weeks. I slept really good (Friday) night. I napped hard (Saturday). It felt like I could have napped forever, but we're in a great spot here, and as soon as I go to the rink I dialed in."

The win kept the Blue Jackets on the edge of a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. With 62 points, they're tied with the two wild-card clubs — the Ottawa Senators and the Detroit Red Wings — but sit in ninth place in the conference because of tiebreakers.

The Jackets and Red Wings play twice later this week, including in the Stadium Series outdoor game Saturday in Ohio Stadium.

“It’s been a lot of fun so far,” Werenski said. “It’s going to be a lot of fun the next couple of weeks. I’m looking forward to it.”

The Blue Jackets were further lifted by the return of three prominent players.

Captain Boone Jenner, who was injured at the end of training camp and had shoulder surgery in October, made his season debut, playing left wing on the Blue Jackets second line with center Sillinger and Johnson. The line was dominant, especially early in the game.

“The thing is, (Jenner) always plays with a lot of energy,” Johnson said. “For all of us, it was contagious. I know Silly and I were really excited to play with him.”

That line worked. Johnson’s two goals give him 19 on the season. Sillinger helped them start with the puck, winning 9 of 12 faceoffs. Jenner played 16:56 and had four hits in his debut.

Evason acknowledged Thursday that he was excited to coach Jenner.

“He’s just such a worker, right?” Evason said. “He’s such a calming presence. We’ve talked about ‘Z’ (Werenski) and his presence on the bench, but to have another role model and another leader — obviously, our leader — back to teaching and coaching from his position, is awesome.”

Right winger Kirill Marchenko, who suffered a broken jaw Feb. 2 in Dallas, returned to the lineup with a specially fitted mask to protect the two plates that were screwed into his jaw to stabilize it.

And defenseman Dante Fabbro, who plays with Werenski on the top pair, returned after suffering a concussion in the same game in which Marchenko was hurt.

KJ ALL DAY! @FanaticsBook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/R3aYwhyaHq

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) February 23, 2025

The Blue Jackets scored only 4:10 into the game when Johnson scored off a wrister from the slot. The lead grew to 2-0 on Johnson’s power-play goal — a wrister from the right circle. Mateychuk’s goal, the second of his NHL career, made it 3-1 midway through the second.

The win was the Blue Jackets’ 27th of the season, matching their total for all of last season.

Still, there’s a keen understanding that they’ll need to play better than they did Saturday. A sloppy game was expected, of course, after such a long layoff. But Tuesday’s game in Nationwide versus Dallas will be a much stiffer test, and the Stars won’t be so forgiving.

“If we’re going to get where we want to go, we’re going to have to play better than that,” Werenski said. “It was a little bit to be expected. That’s part of the break. And it’s important that we got 2 points. But we know we have to play better.”

[BlueJackets.com / For Sample, getting on the ice is a return to his roots](#)

By Garrison McDaniel- February 22, 2025

For Cincinnati Bengals tight end Drew Sample, football is not the only sport he has a passion for.

The NFL veteran is making an appearance at the Blue Jackets Alumni Fantasy Camp and skating with former CBJ players this weekend to rekindle an old love for hockey.

"I grew up playing hockey before I played football, from when I was like 4 or 5 to like 15 or 16," Sample said. "Then football kind of took over and ended up working out for me."

Now, going into his seventh NFL season, the Bellevue, Wash., native has found time in his offseason routine to make it to the ice rink more to play the sport he grew up with.

"I was just taking some time off, and I was like, 'I'm just going to skate a little bit,' and it's kind of like riding a bike," Sample said. "After a couple of times, I was like, 'Oh, that was fun and relaxing,' and then I had the opportunity to come up here, and I was like, 'Oh, that's pretty cool.' So I practiced a little bit more. It was fun."

Sample has 100 receptions and 730 receiving yards throughout his career that has been spent solely with the Bengals. The 29-year-old tight end started in 15 of the team's 17 games this past season, making 20 catches for 109 yards and a touchdown.

As you might imagine for someone who checks in 6-foot-5, 255 pounds, he was unable to skate in recent years because of his shoe size, but with some help from the Blue Jackets he now can hit the ice whenever he would like.

"I just got skates recently, just because they didn't have my size, so the Blue Jackets hooked it up," Sample said.

Though he grew up in Washington, Sample spent his early years in the San Jose area. He made it out to Sharks games as a kid, leading to his love for hockey and a desire to play.

"I used to go to Sharks games when I was like a little baby," he said. "Then we moved to Washington. I was like, 5, I think, and I was like, 'I want to play hockey.' There's not a lot of hockey in Washington, so I ended up starting when I was like literally a mini-mite up there and played AAA all the way from like 7 or 8 to like 15."

When Sample was 16, it was time to pick a path, and he decided to take football more seriously as he was starting to get offers from Division I college football programs. However, the decision was not made without some deliberation as he was also invited to a WHL camp.

"At the time, those first couple of years I played both, I was probably better at hockey," he said. "I like to believe I could have maybe made it."

His decision ultimately boiled down to his desire to play in college. When the University of Washington offered him a scholarship, he decided football was his future.

"I wanted to go to college, so then that's more of an East Coast thing (for hockey), and I didn't want to move away, and then that just happened," he said. "It was just really good timing where I was like, I really like football, and I was good at it. Those things kind of just timed up and the rest is kind of history."

Although football is his main focus and his life passion, Sample always finds his way back to the sport he first found in life.

“When I'm done playing, I'll definitely get into some beer league hockey,” he said. “Give me a little bit of purpose. I'm sure when I'm done playing – hopefully not for a long time – that's always kind of been in the back of my mind.”

[BlueJackets.com / Friendly competition helps push Johnson, Bedard to new heights](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- February 22, 2025

Head to the North Shore of Vancouver in the summer and you might find some of the most entertaining hockey you'll ever see.

The picturesque city where mountains, water and forest meet also has become one of the world's best hockey hotbeds, producing players that are helping redefine what's possible in our game.

Two of them will be on the ice tonight at Nationwide Arena in Columbus' Kent Johnson and Chicago's Connor Bedard. And the two ultra-skilled forwards from Vancouver aren't just adversaries who can fill up the stat sheet, they're friends who spend each summer pushing each other to reach new heights.

As such, they can draw quite a crowd to their offseason skates, though it's pretty clear who the favorite is among the youngsters who come out to see their hockey heroes.

"These little kids are out there and they're chanting, 'Go Connor!' even when I'm shooting," Johnson said with a laugh. "I'm always joking, it's always like I'm playing on the road. It's cool. I really enjoy it. It's funny, but he's definitely a bit of a rock star. Makes me feel like a nobody sometimes."

Bedard, ever humble, disputes that a bit.

"People are there to see him too," the Chicago wunderkind said. "It's fun. It's good skates there in the summer. I've enjoyed growing our relationship and just getting to see his growth as a player. Obviously, he's doing great. He's a special player, and it's fun to watch."

Indeed, the two are some of the brightest young offensive stars in the game. Bedard needs little introduction, as the No. 1 overall pick in the 2023 draft came into the league ordained as one of the league's next superstars. After a junior career in which he scored 71 times in 57 games in his final season, Bedard has shown he can have a similar impact in the NHL as a teenager, posting 38 goals and 110 points in 123 NHL games over a season and a half.

Johnson also went into his draft billed as a difference maker because of his high-level skill, and the Blue Jackets made him the No. 5 overall pick in the 2021 draft out of the University of Michigan. After one of the top rookie seasons in team history in 2022-23, Johnson is having the best season of his NHL career at age 22 for the Blue Jackets, notching 17 goals and 36 points in 42 games amid a breakout campaign.

It all started back at the North Shore Winter Club when Johnson was 14 years old and Bedard was 11.

"There was always ice available where you could go on and like play shinny, work on skills," Johnson said. "He was just this little kid who was always out there. I was out there a lot, so I was like, 'Who is this kid? He's tiny but he looks unreal.' And then I went to ask who that is, and they were like, 'Oh, he's the best player of his age in the world, they're saying.'"

After a year of seeing each other at such skates, they ended up on the same roller hockey team, with Bedard playing with kids three years older than him. The end result? A league championship.

"We were pretty dominant," Johnson said with a laugh. "I honestly don't really know how we ended up on the same team because we were probably the two best players in the league. It was funny."

"That's true," Bedard said with a smile. "We were pretty nice back then."

The two went their separate ways in hockey as time went by, with Bedard going the junior route and Johnson taking the college path, but they stayed friends and kept playing roller hockey together in the summer along with CBJ defenseman Jake Christiansen.

As the friendship developed, so did their skills, as they became close training partners in the summer. Johnson realized early on that he could learn from Bedard.

"It's kind of funny – when I'm 15, he's 12, I'm obviously better than him, but I kind of knew, he's coming for me," Johnson said. "I'm like, 'I have to stay better than him, stay better than him.' There was one summer I came back and he was dominating me early in the summer, getting the best of me more than I was him, and I was like, 'I have to get my shot better.' I think everything in our games was pretty equal, but his shot was just far better than mine. We played 3-on-3 and he would win, and I was like, 'I need to learn to shoot it a bit like him.'"

"He really pushed me to work on my shot and get it better. It's not even that I was worried about my shot for the season, I was worried about my shot so I could compete with him in the summer. He's helped me a ton with that. Just seeing up close what's so good about his shot, it's really helped me."

For Bedard, the feeling is mutual.

"I think we both have helped each other a lot," he said. "Our skates in the summer, it's intense. We want to beat each other. We're never really on the same team, and I can learn so much just watching him. Now we're at a point where we're talking about little things, sending each other clips of something we see or whatever. It's great when you can have that healthy competition in the offseason and just watch a guy, and you can learn so much from him."

That competition will continue tonight in Nationwide Arena, and if it's anything like the teams' matchup in December, fireworks could be had as both Johnson and Bedard scored in the first period of that game in the United Center.

The two had dinner last night in Columbus, just as they did in Chicago a few months ago, and they'll continue to push each other to reach the top of the NHL.

"It's awesome to be with a guy like that," Bedard said. "He's so committed to getting better, and a great guy off the ice, so it's fun to play with him tonight."

[BlueJackets.com / Werenski has goal, 2 assists in win against Blackhawks](#)

By Craig Merz- February 22, 2025

COLUMBUS – Zach Werenski had a goal and two assists for the Columbus Blue Jackets in a 5-1 win against the Chicago Blackhawks at Nationwide Arena on Saturday.

Werenski extended his home point streak to 22 games (14 goals, 27 assists), tying Phil Housley (1991-92) for the third-longest streak by a defenseman. Bobby Orr (1974-75) holds the record at 25 games.

It was a memorable homecoming for Werenski, who led all scorers at the 4 Nations Face-Off with six points (all assists) while helping the United States reach the final against Canada.

“A lot of energy mentally the last couple of weeks,” he said. “So, I slept good last night. I napped hard today. Could have napped forever it felt like.

“But we're in a great spot here. Since I got to the rink, I was ready to go and I dialed in and I thought our team did a good job of staying focused for the most part.”

Kent Johnson scored twice, Dmitri Voronkov had two assists, and Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves for the Blue Jackets (27-22-8), who had lost four straight (0-3-1).

“We got two points but now we know we have to play a little bit better moving forward,” Werenski said.

Craig Smith scored, and Petr Mrazek made 16 saves for the Blackhawks (17-32-7), who have lost five of six (1-3-2).

“We had flashes of some decent hockey,” Blackhawks defenseman Alex Vlasic said. “In the second period, we kind of jumped on them, but they're an opportunistic team and anytime we kind of fell asleep or made a mistake, they capitalized.

“Call it what you want for shaking off the rust, but I think they came ready to play so there's no excuses for us.”

Johnson gave the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead at 4:10 of the first period with a wrist shot from the high slot.

He then made it 2-0 on the power play at 1:12 of the second period, beating Mrazek with a wrist shot from above the right circle through Voronkov's screen.

“I think we can still get going and get back into our game and be better, but it obviously feels nice when the puck is going,” Johnson said.

Merzlikins said it was difficult for him after the two-week break for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

“The game seemed really fast and we had really good three practices before here and it was just about trying to find the flow and get back in that way,” he said.

Smith cut it to 2-1 at 4:53, redirecting Vlasic's shot past Merzlikins.

Denton Mateychuk carried the puck into the offensive zone and beat Mrazek with a wrist shot from the high slot to extend the lead to 3-1 at 12:42.

“It's frustrating, it's unacceptable, it's embarrassing,” Smith said. “To a certain point it's getting embarrassing, so we have to continue to dig deep.”

Werenski scored on a breakaway at 13:51 of the third period to make it 4-1.

"Impressed? 100 percent. Shocked? No," Columbus coach Dean Evason said of Werenski's performance. "He's just such an incredible athlete. His engine and all the emotions that he went through the last few days. I'm sure such great highs, obviously, and then a very big low, and he just slides back in and goes about his business and helps his team have success here tonight."

Adam Fantilli scored at the top of the crease for the 5-1 final at 14:44.

"In the third we made a push, (Merzlikins) made some big saves when it was 3-1 and then they come right back," interim Blackhawks coach Anders Sorensen said. "They get the fourth one and the wind took out of our sails a little."

NOTES: Werenski tied Rick Nash (39) for the most multiassist games in Blue Jackets history. ... Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner assisted Werenski's goal in his season debut after shoulder surgery on Oct. 9. Jenner played 16:56.

BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets take care of business vs. Blackhawks

By Garrison McDaniel- February 23, 2025

After CBJ wins, we'll give three takeaways about what stood out or what we'll remember from the Blue Jackets victory.

BLUE JACKETS 5, BLACKHAWKS 1

1. The Blue Jackets came back from two-week break ready to get back into a playoff push.

Columbus picked up a big two points against the Chicago Blackhawks to tie the Detroit Red Wings and Ottawa Senators in the Eastern Conference's top wild card spot.

The standings are lining up for a dramatic finish to this regular season as with 25 games remaining for Columbus, there are eight teams within five points of each other vying for two playoff spots.

The Blue Jackets and Red Wings will have back-to-back games with each other including the NHL Stadium Series game at Ohio Stadium on Saturday that is proving to be one of the most influential games of the season.

"Points are so important right now," CBJ defenseman Zach Werenski said. "With just over a month and a half left in the season, we're battling with (Detroit). We're battling with Ottawa, the Rangers. It's fun to look at it, right? We're in a great spot."

Winning hockey is fun to play and for this team, coming back and being in the hunt will make all of these games that are coming up both fun and exciting. Forward Kent Johnson, who had two goals in the win, said it was good to get back on the ice with all his teammates and compete again.

"I'm excited to just kind of keep going," Johnson said. "It's fun to just get back out there and be with the guys."

2. Werenski didn't miss a beat in extending his home point streak to 22 games.

After making his country proud as the points leader in the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament, Werenski picked back up where he left off with one goal and two assists.

The Blue Jackets' star defenseman now has 62 points on the season, second among all NHL blueliners behind Colorado's Cale Makar (63). Now with his 22nd game in a row with a point at home, his streak is tied for third all-time among NHL defensemen with Paul Coffey and just three games back of Bobby Orr's record of 25 games.

"Impressed? 100%," head coach Dean Evason said of Werenski's performance just days after the 4 Nations ended. "Shocked? No. He's just such an incredible athlete."

The last 48 hours leading up to the game were eventful for Werenski. He went from the finals of a tournament that had a playoff-esque atmosphere to one day off and then back to work today.

"I think the last two weeks here, I was pretty focused. A lot of energy mentally the last couple of weeks," Werenski said. "So I slept well last night and I napped hard today. I could have napped for forever, but we're in a great spot here. So once I got to the rink, I was ready to go, and I dialed in."

With how fast he went from the 4 Nations final to the CBJ game, Werenski said he still has not been able to reflect on the tournament, but soon he will look back and realize what he took part in.

"It doesn't feel like the 4 Nations happened," he said. "It's just such a quick turnaround, no time to even digest it or think about it. Get back yesterday, I woke up today and (it's) game day, so I think (Sunday) and Monday, I'll have time to really reflect on it and just think about how cool it really was."

3. Joseph LaBate made a splash in his Blue Jackets debut.

It had been nearly eight years since the 6-foot-5 forward laced his skates ahead of an NHL game that he was playing in. After a long hiatus, he impressed in his Blue Jackets debut.

Although he did not fill up the stat sheet, earning 7:19 of ice time, making three hits, finishing with a plus-1 rating and a fight with former CBJ captain Nick Foligno, LaBate found other ways to impress his new coaching staff.

"What we were impressed with was his presence on the bench for a guy that wasn't here in training camp," Evason said. "I don't know how many guys he actually knows in the locker room. Certainly doesn't know us as a coaching staff, he knows (assistant coach) Scott Ford, but he was vocal, he was positive."

Evason was also impressed with his on-ice ability. LaBate adds a lot of physicality to the Blue Jackets locker room with his size and his skating ability, making the 31-year-old an ideal addition to the bottom six.

"He did all those things as a big man, had a good stick, finished his checks," Evason said.

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets Alumni Fantasy Camp provides memories to last a lifetime](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- February 23, 2025

Watching the Blue Jackets practice over the past seven years of covering the team, as a rec league goalie, I've always wondered what it would be like to step between the pipes and face a few shots from NHL players.

That sure would be fun, I'd always think.

The other half of my brain: That would also be tiring.

After having the opportunity to step on the ice for Blue Jackets Alumni Fantasy Camp this week, I can confirm I was correct.

It's a total blast.

It's also exhausting.

Unlike in a game, where you have an opportunity to catch your breath when the puck is on the other side of the ice, NHL-style practices are rapid-fire events for goaltenders, designed to let the players get their shots off while netminders gasp for air.

That was one reason Jody Shelley, the CBJ broadcaster and alumni head who organizes the event, had me come out and help during the practices featuring players and campers. After last year's inaugural camp, it was clear the goalies could use a break every once in a while, so throwing a third person between the pipes could only help.

Of course, it was also a golden opportunity to get on the ice with former NHL players and see how I stacked up, and I certainly wasn't going to turn that down. I also knew from the first event just how fun it was, with both alumni and campers having a great time both on the ice and off of it.

When you sign up to join the camp, the biggest draw is the ability to get on the ice and be treated like a pro for three days, as well as living out your dream of playing with some of the most notable names in franchise history, from Shelley to Rick Nash (Rick Nash!) to Fredrik Modin to Jared Boll to everyone's new best friend, Mike Sillinger.

But once you're there, the thing that stands out the most is the fun away from the rink. This year, campers had the chance to watch the 4 Nations Face-Off final Thursday night and hear from the CBJ alums about their experiences in international play, as well as spend Friday night at a golf simulator swapping more stories – and a few beverages – with the former players. Sitting in the locker room hearing tales – and chirps – from some of the biggest names in franchise history is an experience you just can't get anywhere else.

Add it all up and it's an experience that feels priceless.

"Honestly, (I think what stands out) is the same thing that a lot of guys say, which is the locker room camaraderie," said fellow goalie Jon Edwards, a first-time camper from Upper Arlington. "The shots, the saves, that's definitely going to be a big memory, but to be in the locker room with the guys that are like me but also the alumni, they're all just so gracious, so kind, asking all sorts of insightful questions. They just couldn't be nicer. Just first-class guys, and to be in there like I'm in an adult-league locker room chatting with those guys, that's huge. That's a great memory for sure."

Edwards and fellow goalie Josh Green, a returning camper, were more than gracious when it came to sharing a net throughout the first two days of practice. Though if we're being honest, I think both Edwards and I needed the help; we were both gassed after the first five minutes of drills, just as we had both suspected.

Personally, the first day on the ice went pretty well once we all settled in. At one point during a breakaway drill, I made saves against three consecutive Blue Jackets alumni, though things happened so fast I couldn't tell you who they were. The ultimate vindication came the next morning, when I bumped into Nash, who asked how I was feeling before telling me I did a great job on the ice the night before.

It's a compliment that will last a lifetime, though things were a bit humbling on Friday when the alumni largely had their way with me. At one point, Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre fired a shot from about 45 feet out that I thought I had a bead on; by the time I moved my glove to make the snag, the puck was already hitting the back of the net. When I saw Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell the next morning, he told me I needed some work; it doesn't sound like a contract is forthcoming.

Edwards had a much better fate in the actual game with the pros and campers, with the squads mixed between those who used to skate in the NHL and those who were living the dream. While Nash was able to get a few pucks past Edwards, the goalie also made his fair share of stops on the NHL legend, including one late in the game to protect his team's lead.

"It's hard not to realize it's Rick Nash," Edwards said. "To have him rip a few by me, that's to be expected, but to get a few saves on him, that's a core memory. I'll keep that one forever."

It's one he'll get to share with his family, including his two young daughters Charlotte and Gwen, who watched the game in Nationwide Arena.

The same could be said of returning camper Steve Vyn. Originally an Ohio native, he currently lives in Texas but took part in last year's inaugural event and decided to come back after talking with a few fellow campers – yes, those who played a year ago keep in touch.

This time, he convinced his older brother Michael, an Air Force colonel, to come and take part before the two continue their brothers trip by going skiing.

"It was extra special having my brother out there," said Steve, who made sure to give his brother a few chirps throughout the event. "He's real humble. He's the head honcho (at work). I'm his brother, I can give it to him, so he's not used to it anymore."

But in many ways, the whole camp felt like a family. As Shelley often says, the alumni have just as much fun if not more than the campers; by the time the three days are over, plenty of friendships have been made, and everyone feels like they can't wait for next year's event.

Unless that NHL contract is on the way from Waddell...

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Cruise to Convincing Win Over Blackhawks

By Mark Scheig- February 22, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets needed to open post 4-Nations play with a win. In front of another sellout crowd, they were able to win going away.

Kent Johnson scored twice while Zach Werenski fresh off being the leading scorer at the 4-Nations added a goal and two assists to lift the Blue Jackets to a 5-1 win in front of 18,809 fans. Elvis Merzlikins was strong making 27 saves.

The story of this game was coming out with good energy and structure throughout the game. Having captain Boone Jenner back helped them in that category.

Game Recap

The Blue Jackets were able to break through just over four minutes into the game. Cole Sillinger with his new linemates of Jenner and Kent Johnson went to work. Sillinger's effort won a couple of battles. The puck landed on Johnson's stick who beat Petr Mrazek from the slot.

Johnson's 18th goal of the season was assisted by Sillinger and Zach Werenski. Werenski's home points streak is now at 22 games which is tied for the third-longest in NHL history for defensemen.

The Blue Jackets went to the room up 1-0 but had around 1:40 of power-play time to start the second. They needed to take advantage of situational hockey. They were able to convert on that power play.

Johnson scored his second of the night to make it 2-0. More than the goal itself, this gave the team momentum and confidence to settle into the game. Coach Dean Evason admitted as such postgame.

Despite Craig Smith beating Merzlikins to cut it to 2-1 five minutes into the second, that was all the Blue Jackets would allow on the night. They settled in and stymied the Blackhawks the rest of the night. This allowed the offense to put the game out of reach.

Denton Mateychuk scored an unassisted goal to make it 3-1. His confidence and aggressive play made the goal happen. It was perhaps one of his best games as a Blue Jacket at both ends of the ice.

Werenski and Adam Fantilli scored 53 seconds apart in the third to get to the final score of 5-1. Postgame, Evason admitted the team was watching when the Blue Jackets had the crowd sing happy birthday to Johnny Gaudreau Jr. during a timeout. Here's what he said postgame about the moment.

"We weren't locked in. We were watching. Hard not to lose your composure but way more happy thoughts. We've talked about our crowd and our fans. I mean, it's just incredible. The organization, but for the fans to recognize and do that, it was very special. To see Meredith and the kids, it was hard to see her because it was emotional. But I think she felt the happiness that we all did as well."

With the win, the Blue Jackets pull into a tie with the Red Wings and Senators at 62 points but are behind in tiebreakers. They next play Tuesday night when they host the Dallas Stars. Meanwhile, the Blackhawks head home to host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Sunday.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Jenner, Werenski, Jones & More

By Mark Scheig- February 22, 2025

Welcome back to the stretch run of hockey. The 4-Nations Faceoff is over. It couldn't have gone better from an execution standpoint.

Now comes the time when teams dig in for the last third of the season positioning themselves to be ready for the playoffs. For the Blue Jackets, every game is a playoff game in feel given they enter play on Saturday just one point out of a wildcard spot in the Eastern Conference.

The Blue Jackets host the Chicago Blackhawks Saturday night in Nationwide Arena. We start this edition of News & Rumors with a long cast of reinforcements returning to the lineup.

The Captain is Back

While things were trending this week towards a return to play for captain Boone Jenner, coach Dean Evason on Saturday morning confirmed that Jenner will make his season debut. Recall he got injured during the last day of training camp and had to have surgery. It will be just short of five months out of action.

Jenner admitted there will be some nerves at the start. But once things get going, he'll be back to his usual self. He's not the only one returning to the lineup. Kirill Marchenko returns after taking a puck to the face in Dallas. Joseph LaBate draws in for the injured Kevin Labanc who will miss the rest of the season due to a shoulder injury.

Although Evason didn't directly say it, Dante Fabbro is primed to return to the lineup for the Blue Jackets as well. In one sense, all of these reinforcements act as a trade deadline acquisition especially in the case of Jenner. The team gets their captain, top right-winger and top-pair defenseman back after the 4-Nations.

Jenner's return cannot be understated in its importance. He will play on the left wing to start with Cole Sillinger and Kent Johnson. His presence is expected to give a boost to the Blue Jackets at a time where they need something like this.

As Jenner said this week, he feels 100% and has no restrictions in terms of taking faceoffs or contact. His presence will also allow the team to present a different look, perhaps one more in line with close, tight-checking games that are more like the playoffs. It will be interesting to see if there is a difference right out of the gate due to Jenner's return.

Werenski Is in Saturday

Fresh off the 4-Nations, Zach Werenski will play against the Blackhawks on Saturday night. He did everything asked of him and then some except win the Final.

Still, Werenski says that Final stood out to him and will be something he will always remember.

"It was intense. It was probably the most fun I've had playing a hockey game ever," Werenski said. "I think just the atmosphere leading up to it, the excitement, the build up, the crowd, just everything involved with it. I think the overtime, it's unfortunate we lose but I think just how it all played out, it was incredible."

Werenski said he traveled back to Columbus Friday. He knows the importance of this upcoming stretch.

"Yesterday was a tough day with travel, getting back here and settled in," Werenski said. "Definitely a little bit tired but I'm also really excited to get back with the guys here. I love these guys. We're in a fun spot on the season right now with the playoff race and excited to get back in front of our fans tonight."

Potential Seth Jones Reunion

Word started going out that Seth Jones wants traded from the Blackhawks. He spoke to the Hockey Writers Saturday morning in Columbus. When asked if he would consider a return to the Blue Jackets, he admitted being open to the idea.

"Yeah, for sure," Jones said. "It was very special when I played with Zach as partners for the most part of 5 1/2 years. We had a chemistry as soon as we started playing together right when we came out of college."

Werenski also said he would be open to a Jones' reunion.

"I always like going up against Jonesy," Werenski said. Got dinner with him last night with Boone (Jenner). One of my best friends in hockey. I haven't yet (tried convincing him to come back.) But I'd be open to it. I love playing with him and as a friend most importantly, we're close. I hope whatever he's dealing with works so it works itself out. He's a hell of a player and I wish him all the best."

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell spoke on Friday at Ohio Stadium and did address some trade deadline stuff. Of note, the team won't be trading top picks or prospects. Ideally, they are looking for a depth forward that won't come at top price.

Would the Blue Jackets be open to exploring Jones? Waddell hasn't said anything on the record about it. He did try to acquire Jacob Trouba earlier in the season when the defense was not in a good place.

Waddell would prefer hockey trades if possible. Whether one involving Jones comes to pass remains to be seen. One would suspect money would be a major factor in pulling something like this off.

Personally, it would surprise me to see it happen. With over \$6 million invested in Damon Severson, that would be tough to add that salary when a lot of other business is coming the down the road for the Blue Jackets. Keep expectations in check for now.

Side Dishes

- Both Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson skated Saturday. Each are working their way back from significant injuries. While there is not a known timeline to return, it's possible both return later in March assuming all goes well in the rehab process.
- Elvis Merzlikins will start Saturday night's game against the Blackhawks.
- Nick Foligno and his family are building a house in Columbus as we speak. Once his playing days are over, he will settle in and then see what the future holds. Whether that means a potential front-office position or the like remains to be seen. He hosted Jenner, Werenski and Jones to his house on Friday night although he didn't join them for dinner. Foligno said someone had to stay at the house and work.
- Connor Bedard had dinner with Kent Johnson, Jake Christiansen and Adam Fantilli on Friday. Back in Chicago, Bedard said he treated them to Gibson's. This time, they treated Bedard to a meal in Columbus.

1st Ohio Battery / Boone Jenner Poised To Make His Season Debut Saturday Night When The Blue Jackets Return To Action

By Ed Francis- February 22, 2025

The Captain. Is. Back.

The Columbus Blue Jackets officially activated Boone Jenner from injured reserve on Friday, finalizing the path for the captain to make his season debut Saturday night against the Chicago Blackhawks.

Jenner was injured on the last day of training camp and required shoulder surgery.

Since the Blue Jackets returned to practice Wednesday, Jenner has been practicing at left wing opposite of Kent Johnson and centered by Cole Sillinger. There was no change to that at Friday's practice, a strong indication that head coach Dean Evason will line Jenner up at left wing Saturday night.

For the last several seasons, Jenner has been playing a center role out of necessity. But with the strong play of Sean Monahan and the emergence of Adam Fantilli as Columbus' top two centers, it allows the Blue Jackets to move Jenner back to his primary role on the wing.

Even with Monahan out right now and expected to return sometime in March, the Blue Jackets still appear determined to get Jenner as his natural wing position.

Jenner, 31, has scored at least 22 goals in each of the last three seasons. His return to the lineup gives Columbus much-needed scoring depth without having to make a trade, and General Manager Don Waddell has said on several occasions that he looks at the return of Jenner like a deadline acquisition without having to give up any assets.

Last season, Jenner finished with 22 goals and 13 assists for 35 points in 58 games. He played, as he has over his career, valuable minutes on both the power play and penalty kill in addition to his even-strength minutes. His 20:06 of average ice time last year led all Columbus forwards.

Expect him to be in the ice in all situations again this season.

As crucial as it is to get back the on-ice production of someone like Jenner, the Blue Jackets are also adding someone who is synonymous with Columbus hockey: Jenner is the all-time leader in games played with Columbus (715), he's third in franchise history in goals (192), third in points (364), and just one away from Cam Atkison for second in power-play goals in franchise history.

Getting their locker room leader back is happening at the perfect time for the Blue Jackets, who sit just one game out of a potential wild card spot in the cramped Eastern Conference playoff race.

In a related move, the Blue Jackets also activated forward Kirill Marchenko from injured reserve. He went down with a broken jaw Feb. 2nd, missing the team's final three games before the 4 Nations Face-Off break.

Marchenko is expected to resume his role at the top-line right winger opposite of Dmitri Voronkov and centered by Fantilli.

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day #56: Boone Jenner, Kirill Marchenko, And Dante Fabbro Return To Lineup Saturday As Blue Jackets Begin Playoff Push

By Ed Francis- February 22, 2025



CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS
SATURDAY, FEB. 22
7:00 P.M.

NATIONWIDE ARENA
COLUMBUS, OH

BLACKHAWKS:
17-31-7 (41pts; .373%)
Last Ten: 3-3-4
Division: 8th of 8
Conference: 15th of 16
NHL: 31st of 32

Everything is happening all at once.

Boone Jenner will make his season debut, Kirill Marchenko and Dante Fabbro are both back in the lineup, and the Columbus Blue Jackets are in action for the first time in two weeks when they face the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

The game is the beginning of what will be a mad dash of 26 contests between now and the end of the regular season, with a half-dozen teams packed within six points of the two wildcard spots and several more lurking just a couple points behind that.

"With 26 games left, you look at the schedule, it's a couple of months," said Jenner. "It's super tight right now as it stands, and it's only going to be tighter and these games mean more and more as you come down the stretch."

The games especially mean more when they're ones that the Blue Jackets should win — of which Saturday's game is one. The Blackhawks exit the break with the second-fewest points in the NHL, ahead of just the San Jose Sharks. They're near the bottom of the league in goals and goals allowed, and they're also abysmal on the road (6-17-4). Columbus, meanwhile, has been dominant at home (17-6-4).

Here's what else to know when the Blue Jackets return to the ice for the playoff push:

CHI		SEASON STATS		CBJ
6-17-4		ROAD / HOME		17-6-4
28th	2.69	GOALS FOR	3.21	10th
t/30th	3.44	GOALS AGAINST	3.30	25th
8th	24.6%	POWER PLAY	21.1%	18th
7th	82.0%	PENALTY KILL	75.3%	26th
Last	24.8	SHOTS FOR	29.0	t/11th
30th	31.8	SHOTS AGAINST	29.4	t/25th
31st	45.3%	FACE-OFFS	46.8%	28th
CHICAGO: LAST THREE GAMES				
WED, 2/5		vs. Oilers	OTL, 4-3	
FRI, 2/7		vs. Predators	W, 6-2	
SAT, 2/8		@ Blues	SOL, 6-5	
CHICAGO: TEAM LEADERS				
GOALS		Ryan Donato	19	

CHI	SEASON STATS	CBJ
ASSISTS	Connor Bedard	33
POINTS	Connor Bedard	49
ODDS & PROJECTIONS		
CBJ WIN PER MONEYPUCK:		61%

CBJ ODDS PER ESPNBET: -155



- **RE: HAWKS**
Petr Mrazek gets the start for Chicago and will oppose Elvis Merzlikins, who gets the start in the Columbus net. Mrazek has a 10-18-2 record this season as the Blackhawks starter, with a 3.27 goals against average and save percentage of .897. ... Connor Bedard has a point in three straight games and has been in the box score in seven of his last eight games overall. ... Former Blue Jackets Seth Jones (6 goals, 20 assists) and Nick Foligno (11 goals, 14 assists) are two of the six Blackhawks' with 25+ points this season. ... Chicago has a lot of weaknesses, but their special teams aren't amongst them: the Blackhawks rank top ten in power play and on the penalty kill.
- **JENNER'S RETURN & ROLE**
Jenner, the Blue Jackets captain who was injured on the last day of training camp and required shoulder surgery, has practiced with Cole Sillinger and Kent Johnson on Columbus' second line. For the last several seasons, Jenner has been at center out of necessity. But with the strong play of Sean Monahan and the emergence of Adam Fantilli as Columbus' top two centers, it allows head coach Dean Evason to move Jenner back to his primary role on the wing. Even with Monahan out until sometime in March, the Blue Jackets seemingly want consistency in the lineup and are keeping Jenner at the wing.
- **MARCHENKO, FABBRO BACK TOO**
Marchenko, who will wear a protective face mask as he continues to recover from a broken jaw sustained at the beginning of the month, will jump right back into the top wing spot in Columbus' lineup, opposite of Dmitri Voronkov and centered by Adam Fantilli.
Fabbro, who was injured in the same game, will slide into his traditional spot opposite of Zach Werenski on Columbus' top defensive pairing.
- **LINEUPS & PROJECTIONS**
Aside from all of the returns, there is one other change to the lineup: forward Kevin Labanc had shoulder surgery during the break and will miss the remainder of the season. In his place, Joseph LaBate has been called up from Cleveland. LaBate has not played an NHL game since skating in 13 contests with the Vancouver Canucks during the 2016-17 season. It's been a long, tough road back to the NHL for LaBate, who will see minimal minutes on the fourth line.

Here are the complete lineup projections:

LW		C		RW	
10	Dmitri Voronkov	19	Adam Fantilli	86	Kirill Marchenko
38	Boone Jenner	4	Cole Sillinger	91	Kent Johnson
27	Zach Aston-Reese	17	Justin Danforth	24	Mathieu Olivier
21	James van Riemsdyk	7	Sean Kuraly	14	Joseph LaBate
LD		RD			
8	Zach Werenski	15	Dante Fabbro		
5	Denton Mateychuk	9	Ivan Provorov		
2	Jake Christiansen	78	Damon Severson		
Starting Goalie		Back-Up			
90	Elvis Merzlikins	40	Daniil Tarasov		

1st Ohio Battery / CBJ 5, CHI 1: Johnson, Werenski Combine For Three Goals, Five Points In Blue Jackets Rout Of Blackhawks

By Ed Francis- February 22, 2025

	1	2	3	F
	0	1	0	1
	1	2	2	5

CBJ GOALS:

K. Johnson (P1, 4:10)

K. Johnson (2) (PP) (P2, 1:12)

Mateychuk (P2, 12:42)

Werenski (P3, 13:51)

Fantilli (P3, 14:44)

Kent Johnson scored twice and Zach Werenski added three points to continue his historic run as the Columbus Blue Jackets smothered the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday night by a final of 5-1.

Johnson got the scoring started early for the Blue Jackets, giving Columbus a 1-0 lead just over four minutes in.

He would add his second goal —a power-play strike — just over a minute into the second period to make it 2-0 in favor of the Blue Jackets.

Werenski assisted on both goals, extending his home point streak to 22 games. That's the third-most all-time by a defenseman, and he's now just one away from tying Phil Housley for second all-time.

Bobby Orr, with 25, holds the record.

After Chicago got to within one just over three minutes after Johnson's power-play goal, Denton Mateychuk restored Columbus' two-goal lead with his second goal of the season to extend Columbus' lead to 3-1.

With the score still 3-1 in the third period, Werenski's 18th goal of the season at 13:51 put the game out of reach and gave the Norris-candidate his fifth 3+ point night of the season. Adam Fantilli added a goal less than a minute later for good measure to complete Columbus' scoring for the evening.

Head coach Dean Evason said that that he was happy with the players conditioning despite the two-week break, while identifying at least one area for improvement before Tuesday's game against the Dallas Stars.

"Our commitment level, our work was real good," said Evason. "We turned the puck over a few too many times coming out of our zone; (it's) something we need to correct here in the next couple of days."

This was the first time that Evason had coached Boone Jenner in a regular season game, and the coach offered up positive praise of his performance after.

"He's such a worker," said Evason. "He's just such a calming presence."

Jenner played 16:56 in his season debut.

Here's how the Blue Jackets picked up two points in their first game out of the break:

1st Period:

(4:10 — CBJ Goal): A good team keep-in from the Blue Jackets leads to the first goal of the game. The puck ends up on the stick of Sillinger, who quickly finds Johnson entering the slot. Johnson makes a couple of quick moves with the puck as he skates in and beats Chicago goalie Petr Mrazek to put Columbus in front, 1-0.

2nd Period

(1:12 — CBJ PP Goal): Johnson gets his second of the game with relative ease. Fantilli wins the faceoff, pushes the puck back to Werenski, he gets it over to Johnson near the boards. Johnson then walks into the slot and fires it past Mrazek for the power-play tally to double Columbus' lead to 2-0.

(4:53 — CHI Goal): The road team get on the board with a power-play goal of their own and cut it to a one-goal game. Craig Smith gets his 8th of the season for Chicago.

(12:42 — CBJ Goal): The Blackhawks clearing attempt is successful, but the puck bounces right to Mateychuk at center ice. He skates in without much opposition and rips it from the high-slot, beating Mrazek to restore Columbus' two-goal lead, this time at 3-1 Blue Jackets.

3rd Period

(13:51 — CBJ Goal): Werenski gets himself a rare breakaway opportunity and makes the most of it. He picks the puck up in the slot and outskates the Chicago defenders en route to his 18th of the season, giving the Blue Jackets a 4-1 lead and effectively putting the game out of reach.

(14:44 — CBJ Goal): If it wasn't out of reach at 4-1 (it was), Fantilli puts the exclamation point on Columbus' win less than a minute later. The top line comes together for a goal as Dmitri Voronkov gets a nice little back-handed pass off to Marchenko behind the goalie. Marchenko skates behind the net and sees Fantilli just outside of the crease, easily beating Mrazek to make it 5-1 Blue Jackets.

CHI		
GAME STATS		
CBJ		
28	SHOTS	21

CHI	GAME STATS	CBJ
39%	FACEOFFS	61%
1/4	POWER PLAY	1/1
0/1	PENALTY KILL	3/4
14	HITS	39
18	GIVEAWAYS	13
6	TAKEAWAYS	6
8	BLOCKED SHOTS	13
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.89	EXPECTED GOALS	1.80
52	SHOT ATTEMPTS	42
25	SCORING CHANCES	29
8	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	7
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

Stat Chat:

- Werenski led all Blue Jackets with 23:11 of ice time, but that's still more than three minutes less than his average of 26:53 this season. It was likely a relief to the coaching staff — and perhaps Z, too — that he was able to avoid another heavy-minutes night.
- Joseph LaBate played 7:19 in his first NHL game in nearly a decade and picked up a fighting major late in the first, too. That fight came against Nick Foligno, the former Blue Jackets captain.

- The Blue Jackets were far more the aggressive of the teams, out-hitting the Blackhawks by a nearly three-to-one margin.

Up Next:

The Blue Jackets return to Nationwide Ice for a Tuesday night match against the Dallas Stars. Puck-drop is set for 7 p.m.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Reinforcements Reinstalled, No Break, No Problem for Werenski, A Critical Two Points

By Will Chase- February 23, 2025

That's how you come off a two-week break.

Zach Werenski continued his 22-game home point streak with a goal and two assists and Kent Johnson scored twice as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the Chicago Blackhawks 5-1 Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

The win snaps Columbus' four-game losing streak. They've won five straight over Chicago.

Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves on 28 shots. Petr Mrazek made 16 saves on 21 shots.

Reinforcements Reinstalled

They're back and they're reloaded.

Captain Boone Jenner made his season debut, Kirill Marchenko returned to the lineup after sustaining a broken jaw in Dallas on Feb. 2, and Dante Fabbro also made his return after an upper-body injury kept him out of the lineup for the Blue Jackets as they continue their playoff push.

Joseph LaBate made his Blue Jackets debut and dropped the mitts with Nick Foligno in the first period. LaBate went seven years in between NHL appearances with his last game coming in Mar. 28, 2017, with the Vancouver Canucks. He had 13 points (six goals, seven assists) in 33 games for the Cleveland Monsters.

Return to Lineup	Assists	+/-	Shots	Blocked Shots	Hits
Jenner, 16:56 TOI	1	2	1	1	4
Marchenko, 16:17 TOI	1	1	1	0	1
LaBate, 7:19 TOI	0	1	0	0	3
Fabbro, 22:41 TOI	0	1	1	0	3

No Break, No Problem for Werenski

Unlike the rest of his teammates, Werenski didn't get a break as he was busy with Team USA in the 4-Nations Face-off where he led Team USA with six points.

Saturday night was just another night for No. 8 as he collected three more points.

Werenski has not gone without a point at Nationwide Arena since Oct. 30 and with another multi-point game on home ice, his point streak stretches another day to 22 games.

Werenski's (43) first assist in the game came on Kent Johnson's (18) first goal at 4:10 of the first period. Cole Sillinger (19) picked up the primary assist.

Then on Johnson's (19) second goal at 1:12 on the power play in the second period, Werenski (44) had the primary assist and Dmitri Voronkov (17) picked up the secondary helper.

Werenski's 22-game home point streak is tied for the third-longest by a defenseman in NHL history. He also has points in three straight games overall (one goal, four assists).

Werenski leads the Blue Jackets with 62 points and 44 assists. Among all defensemen in the league, he trails Cale Makar (63) by one point. Werenski's 46 points in 28 home games (14 goals, 32 assists) is tied with Nathan MacKinnon (13-33) for the most points at home in the NHL.

Denton Mateychuk scored his second of the season (unassisted) at 12:42 to give Columbus the 3-1 lead. Werenski scored on a breakaway for his 18th at 13:51 of the third period. Jenner picked up his first assist and Sillinger earned his second of the game for his 20th.

Among all-time Blue Jackets, Werenski (256) is two assists behind Rick Nash (258) for No. 1 all-time. Werenski (364) is one point behind Jenner (365) for third in franchise history.

Adam Fantilli scored his 16th to make it 5-1 at 14:44. Kirill Marchenko (35) and Voronkov (18) added the assists. Marchenko is on a three-game point streak (one goal, two assists).

Werenski was the First Star of the Night, Johnson was the game's second star, and Merzlikins was the third star.

A Critical Two Points

With the win, Columbus moves into a tie for the first and second wild card spots in the Eastern Conference.

The Ottawa Senators lost to the Montreal Canadiens 5-2 as they slid into the second wild-card spot. The Detroit Red Wings picked up a point Saturday afternoon in a 4-3 losing effort in overtime to the Minnesota Wild.

The Wings beat Columbus 5-4 on Jan. 2 at Nationwide Arena and will play one another on Thursday in Detroit leading into Saturday's marquee outdoor matchup at Ohio Stadium.

The Boston Bruins fell in overtime to the Anaheim Ducks 3-2 and are one point behind the Blue Jackets. The New York Rangers lost 8-2 to the Buffalo Sabres and are four points back of the Jackets.

Big Western Test

The Blue Jackets battle the Dallas Stars on Tuesday, Feb. 25 at 7 p.m. ET at Nationwide Arena.

The Athletic / U.S.-Canada 4 Nations Face-Off final draws 9.3 million viewers, most-watched NHL-sanctioned game in decades

By Richard Deitsch- February 22, 2025

Take two proud hockey countries in a best-on-best final, add a massive dose of geopolitics into the equation, and then conclude the matchup with a historic overtime goal by the game's best player. It's a recipe for a historic viewership number — and that's what we saw with Canada's 3-2 overtime win over the United States on Thursday at the 4 Nations Face-Off in Boston.

The game drew an astonishing 9.3 million viewers on ESPN, per Nielsen. To put this in perspective: That tops Game 7 of the NHL Finals between Boston and St. Louis in 2019 which drew 8.9 million viewers on NBC — the most-watched NHL game since the league returned to broadcast TV in 1995.

In Canada, Sportsnet said the game averaged 5.7 million viewers and peaked at 7.3 million when Connor McDavid scored the OT winner. Add in 1.18 million viewers on TVA, as per Adam Seaborn of Better Collective, and the game averaged nearly seven million viewers. Canada's population is 40 million.

So adding the two countries up: The game drew more than 16 million viewers in North America.

The earlier round game between the United States and Canada — a 3-1 win over Canada on a rock 'em sock 'em Saturday night in Montreal — averaged 4.4 million viewers on ABC and peaked with 5.2 million viewers in the 10:45 quarter-hour. That had been the most-watched non-Stanley Cup Final hockey telecast in the U.S. since a Blue Jackets-Bruins playoff game on NBC in 2019 that averaged 4.5 million. The NHL said the combined North American audience for last Saturday's game was 10.1 million viewers.

The tournament clearly showed the desire of hockey fans who have been dreaming of best-on-best for years. Next stop for best-on-best: The Olympic Games next year in Cortina-Milan.

The Athletic / Olympic hockey stock WATCH: Risers, fallers, lines that work and other learnings from 4 Nations

By Chris Johnston, Arpon Basu, Fluto Shinzawa and Michael Russo- February 22, 2025

The 4 Nations Face-Off is in the books, with Canada capping a wildly successful event in dramatic fashion Thursday night on Connor McDavid's overtime dagger to win 3-2 over the United States in the final.

The Canadian championship completes hockey's first foray into international best-on-best hockey since 2016. It won't be nearly so long until the next, which will come on an even bigger stage next February.

Can Canada carry over its 4 Nations success to Milan and win Olympic gold? Will the U.S. use its runner-up finish as inspiration to reach greater heights? Will Sweden build on its confidence after gaining at least a point in each game in 4 Nations? Will Finland find the right formula next time?

We'll have to wait a year to find out, but with notes in hand from 4 Nations, the roster-building is already underway for Olympic general managers.

After spending two weeks around the four 4 Nations teams — and their coaches and execs — here are five things we expect them to take away from this event as they look at the next, even bigger competition.

Canada

Chemistry lesson

With so much time having elapsed between best-on-best events, Team Canada was drawing up its forward lines from scratch.

It took some juggling over a couple of games before they landed on pairings that worked effectively across the top three lines:

Connor McDavid-Brayden Point

Nathan MacKinnon-Sidney Crosby

Anthony Cirelli-Brandon Hagel

The decision to move Point up to McDavid's line for the Finland game was a turning point. His speed and offensive instincts proved to be a great complement to the world's best player. The MacKinnon and Crosby duo was a constant throughout, with the summer skating buddies from Halifax meshing well from the get-go. And the Tampa Bay Lightning teammates Cirelli and Hagel formed the heartbeat of the checking line.

That familiarity should be leaned on when they get the team back together again next February.

Crosby's still got it

There will be a day when Crosby is no longer among the elite of the elite. That day is not today.

It bodes well for next year's Olympic squad that the 37-year-old remains such an effective 200-foot force. Crosby was a tone-setter at 4 Nations, both on the ice and off it, despite playing through injury and being the oldest skater in a tournament played at warp speed.

Playing the wing, he still managed to use his brain to change the game. He even got in on the forecheck to create chances in the offensive zone. And his open-ice hit on Mikael Granlund and ensuing empty-net goal against Finland was exactly what was needed in a nervy moment.

Crosby is completely at home wearing Canada's "C" and should reprise the role in Milan.

While there's a case to be made for passing the torch to McDavid, it's unlikely McDavid would even accept the honor with Crosby still playing like this.

The aging curve

It was difficult watching Brad Marchand struggle to keep up with the pace for much of the tournament. He no longer possesses the speed needed to beat a defenseman wide at this level and was clumsy with rushed puck touches at times, though his competitiveness was still apparent in the biggest game, when he looked dangerous at times.

The overall dip in his play, though, was reflected in his minimal ice time.

While Marchand is a player Hockey Canada has deep affinity for — he wore the "A" when Cale Makar was unable to play the first game against the Americans — there's a real chance the 36-year-old will have aged out by the time the Olympics come around. He'll need to have a strong showing early next season to remain in the mix. Had he not been named as one of the original six selections to this team in June, he may not have been here at all.

Drew Doughty finds himself in a similar situation at age 35. He had some misadventures during the 4 Nations, though it's important to note he only played six NHL games this season before the tournament after suffering a broken ankle in training camp. His footspeed made for some challenging moments, and he's certainly not a lock for a third Olympic appearance.

Surprises on defense

Travis Sanheim wound up playing the final three games after Shea Theodore was injured in the opener. His performance left a positive impression on the team's decision-makers.

Sanheim brings useful versatility to a short-term event because he's comfortable playing on both sides of the ice and has penalty-killing chops. A big body who skates well, he was able to handle the pace of the 4 Nations tournament and will get serious consideration for a spot at next year's Milan Olympics.

The same can be said for Thomas Harley, who was brought in late on emergency standby and got pressed into action for the round-robin game against the U.S. He'd only skated twice by himself in the days beforehand while on break from the NHL season and still didn't look out of place. Harley was assertive and poised in the championship rematch after surprisingly drawing in for Josh Morrissey, who woke up from his afternoon nap feeling ill.

The 23-year-old is only getting started with Canada at this level.

Binnington's crease

Reports of Canada's goaltending crisis may have been overstated. While Jordan Binnington didn't deliver as clean of a tournament as his predecessor Carey Price did during the 2014 Olympics and 2016 World Cup, he played at a high enough level in the preliminary games to get Canada into the final, which was all the management and coaching staffs were asking for.

And then in the final, he delivered a performance for the ages.

With Binnington being given the start in all four games here, you'd have to imagine he's a getting one of the three Olympic jobs next February and has an inside track on being the starter.

Beyond Binnington, the other spots are very much up for grabs based on performance between then and now.

Finland

It's no longer Saros' job to lose

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen did not play a single minute in the tournament, but he has an opportunity to be the man in Milan. So does Leevi Meriläinen. And so do Juuse Saros and Kevin Lankinen.

Saros was benched after a 6-1 loss to the United States in the tournament opener, Lankinen started the next two games and was pulled for Saros after allowing four goals on 13 shots in the first 25 minutes of Finland's final game, against Canada. Between the two of them, Lankinen and Saros had an .843 save percentage. For Finland to have a chance in Italy, the goaltending will need to be much better.

It would be fair to consider the next 10 months an open audition for the starter's job, and anyone will be considered.

It was long assumed this would be Saros' job to lose, and he has effectively lost it. He can still earn it back, but it's an open competition now.

The top-six pairs need a mix up

Finland had two offensive pairings they stuck with throughout the tournament: Aleksander Barkov with Mikko Rantanen and Roope Hintz with Sebastian Aho. Players moved in and out next to them, but those duos stuck. And they did not produce.

Rantanen and Barkov played extremely well and scored a goal apiece, but Finland needed more from its go-to duo to make up for the depth gap between it and other top countries. Hintz and Aho playing together was a total miss; they were ineffective and unproductive.

Interestingly, after the final game against Canada, coach Antti Pennanen took responsibility for Hintz and Aho's underwhelming tournament. Perhaps the fact that he never split them up has something to do with their performance.

Having Mikael Granlund and Patrik Laine serve as wild cards who moved around the lineup might need to be reconsidered. Granlund was one of the tournament's top scorers and was consistently dangerous. Laine was far from consistent but seemed to improve his play when taken out of the top six and finished with three assists.

The Panthers' checking pair is a go

One pairing up front that worked well, unsurprisingly, was the Florida Panthers duo of Anton Lundell and Eetu Luostarinen. They generated zone time, defended well against top opponents and brought energy, whether they were playing with Granlund or Laine. This is a pairing Finland will be able to count on to defend, play with energy and possess the puck, and both Lundell and Luostarinen are young players who are still improving. They should be even better in Italy.

The defense has good options

Nikolas Matinpalo and Urho Vaakanainen might have ugly minus-5 ratings next to their names, but under the circumstances, they did pretty well in Finland's bottom pair. Henri Jokiharju also played well. All three were last-minute injury replacements, for Miro Heiskanen, Rasmus Ristolainen and Jani Hakanpää.

Having Heiskanen in Italy will obviously be a game-changer for Finland. The fact that they were as competitive as they were while missing the one player they absolutely could not miss bodes well for the

Olympics. Ristolainen will be in that top four with Heiskanen, Esa Lindell and Niko Mikkola, who had an excellent tournament.

After that, the third pairing at the Olympics probably won't be nearly as bad as everyone might have assumed. We'll see if someone like Matinpalo can use his performance in this tournament as a springboard to better results in the NHL, but the Finnish depth on defense is not as shallow as it looked two weeks ago.

Next man up?

There are spots up for grabs on this team. Teuvo Teräväinen, who has 40 points in 55 games with the Chicago Blackhawks, was benched in one game and scratched in another. Joel Armia was a healthy scratch, as well, and Erik Haula was fine. Kaapo Kakko probably helped himself with his showing, but he's no sure thing either.

Jesper Kotkaniemi was the most notable NHL forward not to be named to this team, and he could be in the mix a year from now. Konsta Helenius, the No. 14 pick in last year's NHL Draft, has 20 points in 43 games in AHL Rochester. If he were to make the Buffalo Sabres out of training camp and get off to a hot start, he could be another option. Joakim Kemell, Brad Lambert and Aatu Rätty are in similar situations with the Nashville Predators, Winnipeg Jets and Vancouver Canucks, respectively.

It is also possible Finland take a few players from the AHL or Liiga in Finland to fill out the roster, something they were not allowed to do at the 4 Nations.

Sweden

Nyquist is in trouble

Gustav Nyquist put Sweden on the board against the United States by tipping an Erik Karlsson shot past Jake Oettinger. It was Nyquist's lone point of the tournament.

But the more telling statistic was 9:42, Nyquist's average ice time per game — and the lowest mark of any player for Sweden. The team's No. 4 left wing had trouble keeping pace with his surroundings. At 35, the game will not speed up over the next year. Not only that, but Nyquist will be an unrestricted free agent at the end of this season. His NHL future is uncertain.

William Karlsson, who was unavailable because of an injury, is an upgrade over Nyquist in all areas. Leo Carlsson, added to the roster because of Karlsson's withdrawal, should be in the running for the Olympics with another year of experience.

The Pettersson problem

Elias Pettersson will make the Olympic roster. He is too good not to. But Pettersson has a lot to fix with Sam Hallam. By the U.S. game, the Sweden coach saw no choice but to move the ghostly Pettersson to left wing. Pettersson responded with another zero-point performance. He finished the tournament without a point.

Somehow, whether it's through a mental reset or physical improvement, Pettersson has to get back to earlier-career thresholds.

Hallam loves Eriksson Ek

Pettersson's skill is undeniable. Same goes for Mika Zibanejad. It is no surprise that Hallam designated Pettersson and Zibanejad as his top two centers.

But Joel Eriksson Ek became Hallam's most trusted all-situations center at 4 Nations, and for good reason. Eriksson Ek did everything from taking defensive-zone faceoffs to stationing himself in front of

the attacking net. The Minnesota Wild center does not have the hands, vision or touch of Pettersson and Zibanejad. But his hockey sense, strength on the puck and three-zone dependability will make him Sweden's go-to do-everything center in 2026.

Steep dropoff for Ekholm

The Swedes were counting on Mattias Ekholm. The Edmonton Oilers defenseman was one of three alternate captains. He started on the No. 2 pair with Erik Karlsson, but the Canadians and Finns regularly put the 34-year-old on the back foot, to the point where Ekholm was scheduled to be a healthy scratch against the Americans. Illnesses to Mika Zibanejad and Rickard Rakell put Ekholm back in as the seventh defenseman.

Hampus Lindholm, unavailable for the 4 Nations because of an injury, could be a better Olympic alternative. Lindholm is not as physical as Ekholm but is a better skater.

Don't expect changes in goal

Samuel Ersson took a big step with his win against the Americans. He was Sweden's best player.

But Ersson, added after Jacob Markstrom injured his knee, remains a long shot to make the 2026 roster. A healthy Markstrom deserves to be there. So do Filip Gustavsson and Linus Ullmark.

Tkachuk brothers go together

Matthew and Brady Tkachuk were the heartbeats for the Americans, and you can bet Mike Sullivan, who will also coach the United States in the Olympics, won't start with them on different lines in Milan, as he did in Montreal.

Sullivan put the brothers together in the second period of the opener against Finland, and it turned the game around. It dragged Jack Eichel into the fight, as well. Eichel was a different player against Sweden, when Matthew missed the game and Brady got hurt in the first period and didn't return.

The Tkachuks combined for four goals and an assist against Finland and set the tone in the prelim game against Canada by each fighting in the first three seconds.

"They're just so much fun to watch," defenseman Charlie McAvoy said early in the tournament. "They're like the Bash Brothers a little bit."

Unfortunately for the Americans, Matthew came into the final injured and could only play 15 shifts, with none in the third period or overtime. He was limping badly as he left the arena.

Larkin, Boldy solidify their spots

Dylan Larkin and Matt Boldy scored the winning goals against Finland and Canada (the first game), respectively, and were as consistent as they come in the tournament.

Boldy got better and better as the tournament went — and got to the dirty areas, which has been the biggest criticism of him in the playoffs for the Minnesota Wild. The World Juniors gold medalist from 2021 was a threat in each game. It was vindication after some criticized U.S. general manager Bill Guerin for putting him on the team, saying it was favoritism for a player Guerin also manages as Wild GM.

Larkin, meanwhile, could be in line for an elevated role in the Olympics.

The Red Wings captain started as a fourth-line winger, accepted that role and ended up as third-line center between J.T. Miller and Boldy. When Matthew Tkachuk left the final, Larkin showed how handy he is by popping up to the top six.

He'll just keep getting more responsibility because he's so fast and versatile.

Hughes, Connor disappoint

The difference in the tournament? Nathan MacKinnon and Connor McDavid combined for seven goals. Jack Hughes, Kyle Connor, Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel and J.T. Miller combined for zero.

There's no doubt Hughes and Connor, in particular, left you wanting more.

Playing on the top line with Jake Guentzel and Matthews, something was up with Hughes all tournament. He fumbled the puck constantly, especially in prime shooting positions. Maybe not playing center — and thus not being in motion as much — was part of it. It was hard for him to get the puck on the wall. But also, the coaches clearly didn't want him to get overmatched defensively playing against the top centers in the tournament. That'll have to be resolved before Milan.

As for Connor, Sullivan called his tournament a "mixed bag," which was being kind. He didn't use his speed or shot or get to the inside before being scratched in the final.

This isn't to say Hughes is in danger of not making the Olympic roster, and that probably goes for the goal-scoring Connor, as well.

But there's no doubt Guerin and his staff left some great forwards off this roster — Tage Thompson, Jason Robertson, Clayton Keller, Cole Caufield — so there is pressure on underperformers to have good starts next season.

Younger players like Matthew Knies and Logan Cooley will be pushing to make the team, as well. Perhaps older guys like Brock Nelson and Chris Kreider will age out.

Fox could be in trouble

Quinn Hughes, Zach Werenski, McAvoy, Brock Faber, Jaccob Slavin and Jake Sanderson are likely Olympic shoo-ins.

Werenski, a Norris Trophy contender this season, led the tournament in scoring with six points (all assists). McAvoy was a physical force until he got hurt, and Slavin and Faber were a tremendous shutdown pair. Sanderson, 22, is only on the rise.

Noah Hanifin was up and down, especially in the first half of the game against Finland and in the title game against Canada.

Fox, to be blunt, was not good. He's had a tough year with the Rangers, as well, and the pace of play seemed too fast for the 2021 Norris Trophy winner. He was on for two goals in the final and could be expendable in the Olympics if Hughes and Werenski are the power-play guys.

The problem is there's no obvious choices to replace Fox. John Carlson didn't make the 4 Nations team because the U.S. was worried about his foot speed. Maybe K'Andre Miller improves. Neal Pionk has had a strong season for Winnipeg. And the Americans are keeping an eye on Chicago Blackhawks youngster Alex Vlasic.

Goaltending will be the strength ... again

It's a luxury of riches in net for the Americans.

Connor Hellebuyck could be looking at his second consecutive Vezina Trophy and showed after a couple of bad postseasons that he can handle the pressure. It started rocky when he gave up a rough goal to open the tournament against Finland, but he finished 2-1 with a 1.59 goals-against average and .932 save percentage.

Jake Oettinger played one game against Sweden and was hardly the reason the short-handed Americans lost 2-1.

And then there's Jeremy Swayman, Calder Trophy contender Dustin Wolf and oft-injured Thatcher Demko, who'll be vying for the third spot.

The Athletic / LeBrun: Against a backdrop of political tensions, Canada's 4 Nations win is bigger than hockey

By Pierre LeBrun- February 22, 2025

BOSTON — How many boxes can a Team Canada championship win check off?

Let's see.

Canada's national pride was severely dented last month with a second consecutive quarterfinal loss at the World Junior Championships.

Team USA spoke openly last Saturday night about being ready to take over. "It's our time," Matthew Tkachuk said after a wild 3-1 win at the Bell Centre in Montreal. And why not feel that way after USA Hockey delivered back-to-back World Junior Championships for the first time ever in its program.

And political tensions between the countries, fueled by U.S. President Trump continuing to troll Canada as a future 51st state, added the kind of backdrop to this 4 Nations finale that was felt here at TD Garden on Thursday no matter what anybody said.

So yeah, as head coach Jon Cooper took a sip from a Molson Canadian during his postgame news conference, I asked him if Team Canada could feel what this win might have meant back home.

"I just hope Canada is proud, because every player in that room is proud to be a Canadian," Cooper began. "Did we need a win? Not only our team, but Canada needed a win. The players (bore) that on their shoulders and they took it seriously. This one was different. This wasn't a win for themselves. This was a win for 40-plus million people, and the guys knew it, and they delivered."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came off the top rope after Connor McDavid's overtime heroics, posting on X: "You can't take our country — and you can't take our game."

Mic drop.

It has been a rather wild few days. Hockey players by nature don't like venturing into political brushfires.

But Thursday night, there was an acknowledgement that this wasn't your run-of-the-mill, best-on-best championship game.

Throw in the hockey side of it with the World Junior losses, and USA Hockey threatening to take over as kings of the hill in Canada's sport, that was a mountain of pressure on Team Canada to deliver on this night for a multitude of reasons.

"Yeah, there's been a lot of that kind of stuff going on, we were all aware of that, we were well aware of how much pressure there was on us to bring it home," said veteran defenseman Drew Doughty. "The good thing about Team Canada and the pressure on this team is that we thrive under pressure. And we delivered."

Under immense pressure. Probably the most pressure Team Canada has faced since needing to deliver on home ice at Vancouver 2010.

"I said before the game, all of Canada is watching," Team Canada 4 Nations GM Don Sweeney said after the game. "And for them to go out and deliver, it's a hell of a lot of pride. You can see it, those guys wear it, they own it, it's just great for Hockey Canada."

"Brandon Hagel said it best, right? Everything is for the flag."

The realistic possibility of Team USA winning its first best-on-best event since the 1996 World Cup blended with the political tensions between both countries concocted an explosive elixir that suddenly propelled the 4 Nations Face-Off into a spotlight nobody could have imagined in their wildest dreams when it was announced a year ago.

“It was much more popular than even we would have imagined,” said 4 Nations Face-Off MVP Nathan MacKinnon. “It was getting so much attention from our whole continent. It was pretty cool, the buildup over the last three days of Canada versus USA. A lot of stuff going on with Canada and the USA right now, and us playing against each other was kind of a perfect storm for our sport.”

Was it ever.

But it also put Team Canada players in an uncomfortable spot in the lead-up to the final game. Many of them live and earn a living in U.S. cities and very much enjoy it. They’re not inclined to come out and make a political stand. But deep down, don’t confuse that with not being patriotic.

Sidney Crosby played with one good arm in this event. Several players weren’t 100 percent. They gutted it out because it meant so much to them to wear that maple leaf and win this for Canada.

“I love living in Las Vegas, Nevada, playing for the Vegas Golden Knights,” winger Mark Stone said postgame. “But I love spending my summers in Ottawa, Ontario. I’m Canadian and I’m proud to be Canadian. Putting this jersey on means more to me than most people would believe.

“The reaction we got in Montreal for those two games we played at the Bell Centre was unbelievable,” he added. “I try to stay off social media as best I can, but yeah, we needed this, we needed this. And we got it.”

What was rather noticeable in Team Canada’s jubilant dressing room was that nobody was trying to rub it in, however. As brash as Team USA may have sounded after winning last Saturday night, there were no back-in-your-face sentiments from the winners.

“They’re an amazing team,” MacKinnon said of Team USA. “They were the favorites coming in, but we pride ourselves on being the best hockey nation. For another year at least we have some bragging rights. We’ve got to go do it again next February.”

That’s certainly one reason not to be over the top in winning it. There’s a bigger tournament coming in Italy next February. But I think deep down, there’s also a realization that Team USA is indeed right there. They dominated overtime Thursday but couldn’t beat Jordan Binnington.

So while Canada found a way again — following the same script as Vancouver 2010 where Team USA won the round-robin matchup between the two countries but Team Canada prevailed when it truly mattered in the end — anyone who knows the game can see the gap has shrunk over the past 15 years.

What we have now is a Team Canada-Team USA hockey rivalry that’s never been better. The sport wins out for it.

“I don’t want to sound too corny, but the reality was hockey won today,” Team Canada Olympic GM Doug Armstrong said. “Canada outscored the U.S., but hockey won. This is the best the game has ever been and for everyone in North America to see it, that’s the winner now. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad we outscored them, but hockey truly won.”

There’s some truth to that. After eight and a half years, best-on-best hockey finally returned and the game’s top players embraced it like it was the most important moment in their careers.

We’re getting best-on-best every two years now for the foreseeable future with a 2028 World Cup of Hockey sandwiched between NHL-fueled Olympics in 2026 and 2030.

At the next Olympics, Team USA will have a chance to finally close the deal on Team Canada.

But not on this night. The game's greatest player saw to that in overtime. And the nation that gave the world the sport of hockey celebrated for all kinds of reasons.

The Athletic / Connor McDavid's 4 Nations dagger emphatically opens Team Canada's next chapter

By Chris Johnston- February 22, 2025

BOSTON – “You’re happy he was born in Canada. Thank god.”

Amid the euphoria of the Golden Goal, that’s how Joe Thornton described teammate Sidney Crosby after he froze the clock on a 3-2 overtime victory over an upstart Team USA 15 years ago in Vancouver.

Those words came to mind here again.

The symbolism was unmistakable when Connor McDavid delivered the moment that kept Team Canada atop the podium to cap the NHL’s reintroduction to top-tier international competition at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Same countries. Same score. Another once-in-a-generation player delivering the dagger.

“I’m sure this one means a lot to him,” Crosby said of McDavid. “And it meant a lot to us.”

You’re just happy he was born in Canada.

We clamor so enthusiastically for best-on-best competition to see what happens when you gather so many greats. Canada was pushed to the absolute limit in this competition, losing once to the U.S. in round-robin play and coming within a converted Auston Matthews chance (or three) in overtime from a hollow ending on Thursday night.

It was no foregone conclusion that McDavid would make sure the cups being passed around the visiting dressing room at TD Garden would be filled with celebratory beer.

After opening the scoring for Canada in the previous two games, the world’s best player was having a tough night in the championship. He uncharacteristically bobbled pucks. He saw Mitch Marner move up to his line midway through the game to provide a spark. He backed opponents off with his speed but didn’t find the most dangerous pockets of the ice.

At least, that is, until a little more than eight minutes into overtime, when Marner found him all alone in the slot and McDavid made no mistake with his cleanest look of the entire tournament.

“Yeah, just couldn’t believe it, really,” he said. “Just excited for our group. Honestly, everybody was so dug in. It starts months and months and months ago, with management going out and picking the team, the coaching staff coming together, and then obviously the players doing what we do. It’s been a big production, and it’s just sweet to have it all come together.”

This was the fourth straight Canadian win in best-on-best competition, following the 2010 Olympics, 2014 Olympics and 2016 World Cup of Hockey. But, really, it’s the start of a new era.

If we learned anything from the 12 days that vaulted hockey into a brighter spotlight than it’s accustomed to, it’s that this U.S. team is poised to be a handful for years to come. Canada’s grip on the gold medals and championship trophies isn’t as firm as it once was. The difference was a great moment from the greatest player.

Twelve months out from the return of NHL players to the Milan Cortina Olympics, Canada must prove itself yet again with McDavid as the centerpiece of this new generation.

“That’s a confidence builder, obviously, knowing that we can play and we can beat anybody,” he said. “That American team is as good as you’re going to find. They’re solid all around but we just found a way in a tough building just to get it done. It was special.”

McDavid may have been the most vocal player in calling on the NHL and NHL Players’ Association to create an event like this after enduring an agonizingly long wait to pull on the maple leaf sweater in this environment.

It allowed him to play alongside Crosby, his idol, and the opportunity to secure what he hopes will be the first of many big wins. He’s already got five scoring titles and three Hart Trophies in his trophy cabinet. All that matters to him now is driving team success, especially after getting to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final last June with the Edmonton Oilers and losing to the Florida Panthers.

In Canada, he is already the best at the game the country loves most.

A goal like the one he put past Connor Hellebuyck here simply adds to the growing legend. The mythology. It will be recreated in driveways across the nation.

“Connor is the best player in our game, and for him to put it in like that in such an intense atmosphere in a hostile environment for Canadians was special,” Nathan MacKinnon said. “Hopefully he can do that again next year, too.”

“He’s a driven player,” Cale Makar said. “He’s clutch. He scores those goals when you need him to.”

“He’s got that ability every single night to change a game,” Crosby said. “He’s proven it time and time again, and he proved it in one of the biggest moments tonight.”

There was a sense of relief mixed into the celebration as Team Canada cranked Nickelback’s “Burn It To The Ground” in its cramped dressing room while standing in a circle sipping beers and champagne. Part of the final message delivered from head coach Jon Cooper when the music was turned down was about the importance of getting this experience under their belts together before returning to the Olympics next February.

Before scattering back to their NHL teams, the players scarfed down pizza and posed together for photos. Many of them looked and sounded exhausted after emptying the tanks in a mid-season tournament played at the highest level imaginable. There was no denying how tight the margins were at the end of a night when they fell behind 2-1 and saw the Americans outshoot them 6-4 in the overtime.

“You can’t write it better, really,” goaltender Jordan Binnington said. “That finish was so special, for us, for the country, for our families.”

As McDavid and Crosby walked together to the interview area with gold medals around their necks, they bumped into Patrice Bergeron. The Boston Bruins legend won two Olympic gold medals and a World Junior Championship with Crosby and brought his kids to TD Garden wearing No. 63 Brad Marchand sweaters to take in Thursday’s final.

Patrice Bergeron greets Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid after the #4Nations victory.

He says to Crosby: “You just keep winning, huh?” pic.twitter.com/igCL8F2WLs

— Chris Johnston (@reporterchris) February 21, 2025

When he saw Crosby, he hugged him and said: “You just keep winning, huh?” Then he shook McDavid’s hand and congratulated him on scoring a golden goal that will be remembered by the next generation.

Like any proud Canadian, he was buzzing about what he’d just witnessed from a 4 Nations tournament that started with questions and ended with an exclamation mark.

"I thought it was incredible – almost better than advertised," Bergeron told The Athletic. "We all were waiting for it and I think it was actually beyond any expectations. It was beautiful hockey. It was fun to watch. It was intense, it was physical, it was pretty plays and smart plays.

"Yeah, it was incredible."

And what about No. 97 finishing it off in a fashion reminiscent of No. 87 all those years ago?

"I think that's pretty cool," Bergeron said. "It's only fitting."

The Athletic / Canada's stunning overtime win, plus Wemby's bad luck

By Chris Branch- February 22, 2025

Good morning! I challenge your call.

Best on Best, Indeed: Canada breaks hearts in OT, again

Of course it was Canada, and of course it was in overtime. The brilliant 4 Nations Face-Off ended last night in the most thrilling — or heartbreaking — way possible, depending on your preferred country.

Nearly 15 years ago, it was Sidney Crosby winning a gold medal for Canada against the United States in OT at the Olympics. It made him a legend on a night when Connor McDavid earned his place in lore with his own OT winner against the U.S.

It was swift, beautiful and decisive:

Canada 3, USA 2. There is a brilliant yet jarring suddenness to OT at this level. Hockey is a fast game. It is hard to keep up with a whirring puck live, so every single second feels like must-watch TV when the next goal wins. That's how it felt for a little more than eight minutes last night.

Three instant Pulse takeaways:

The U.S. has not won a best-on-best tournament since 1996, but there will be a quick chance for retribution just one year from now at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

I don't know how this translates to other sports, but hockey should field one of these competitions at every possible point going forward. Our internal metrics were stunning for this game, topping even some Super Bowl interest from readers. I'm excited to see the TV ratings.

Remember our chat last week about the decline of Canadian goalies? Jordan Binnington took offense, apparently, as he was godly in the OT period. The Americans had multiple great looks on net and Binnington stood firm. It was breathtaking.

How are we supposed to go back to the regular season after this?

News to Know

Wemby out

Spurs wunderkind Victor Wembanyama is expected to miss the rest of the season with a blood clot, marking the end of a spectacular sophomore campaign for the league's brightest young talent.

Wembanyama, 21, averaged 24.3 points, 11 rebounds and an NBA-best 3.8 blocks per contest in 46 games played, which renders him ineligible for any postseason awards. He was the front-runner for Defensive Player of the Year. Sam Amick says it's a short-term loss in what should still be an alluring career.

ESPN, MLB break up

Major League Baseball and ESPN mutually agreed to opt out of their TV contract after this season, according to a memo sent to team owners by commissioner Rob Manfred. The reason cited by MLB: "minimal coverage" on ESPN platforms outside of live games. The two have been partners since 1990. See more on their future [here](#).

The Yankees extended manager Aaron Boone through 2027. I'm sure fans will react normally.

USMNT star Christian Pulisic denied there's any rift with Milan manager Sergio Conceicao. Uh oh.

What could be a huge moment in MLB history passed without much fanfare yesterday, in a game that didn't matter. Quickly:

Cubs pitcher Cody Poteet became the first MLB pitcher to ever win a challenge in the new automatic ball-strike system, which allows the pitcher, catcher or batter to challenge an umpire's call. Fabian Ardaya reported the process seemed rather smooth.

It is a simple concept — adding a minimal but startling effect into the game of baseball — yet it has some unique offshoot consequences, as Jayson Stark detailed yesterday. The strike zone is going to change by ... never changing.

Welcome, robots. I promise to be nice.

Things You Need to See: Sentnor sends a rocket

Forgive me if this sounds repetitive: A bright young USWNT star scored a breathtaking goal last night in international play, signaling the sort of star-is-born storyline this group of women is accustomed to by now.

Such was the case with 21-year-old Ally Sentnor, who fired this laser beam into the top corner in the USWNT's 2-0 win against Colombia:

It was a moment for Sentnor, who got her first USWNT start last night and likely earned future playing time. Joining her in the youth movement was 17-year-old Lily Yohannes, who also made her first USWNT start, and was exquisite in the midfield.

See more on the SheBelieves Cup win here, including Cat Macario's special return to the lineup.

We're due for an NBA reset this week, and here's a great place to start. Cleveland is still the clear leader of the Eastern Conference, but New York has been hot. One of these teams could easily make the finals. Take a gander.

An already spirited rivalry gets the added value of stakes here, as both these teams are the class of the Big Ten this year.

Pulse Picks

Our NFL staff embarked on a mock draft and came away with a big splash: the Raiders trading up for their QB of the future. See the picks here.

The high-profile athlete burglaries are still a startling story. Alex Andrejev compiled a great rundown of all the facts.

What's the next stop for Myles Garrett? The NFC East seems to be a likely landing spot, though none of these suitors would surprise me.

Jim Bowden picks 10 teams that should target Vladimir Guerrero Jr. in free agency. The frenzy begins.

The hottest college football recruiting team is ... Illinois? It's true.

The Athletic / Team USA, stung by 4 Nations loss, draws inspiration for Olympics: 'That's the big one'

By Michael Russo- February 22, 2025

BOSTON — Charlie McAvoy's right arm is in a sling, and he'll be out several weeks for the Boston Bruins. Brady Tkachuk's upper left leg was wrapped like a mummy as he prepared to return to, and captain, the Ottawa Senators. Matthew Tkachuk, who played less than seven minutes — including zero shifts after the second period — could barely walk out of TD Garden just before 1 a.m. Friday and surely will miss games for the Florida Panthers. Brock Faber logged just under 29 minutes — more than anybody on the United States or Canada in the tournament final on Thursday night — and now faces a quick turnaround with a Saturday afternoon game with his Minnesota Wild.

The players Bill Guerin assembled to don Team USA sweaters for the grand success that was the 4 Nations Face-Off were only together for 12 days, but they bonded and invested much into trying to win a tournament that will never happen again. And even though they fell to the archrival Canadians, 3-2 in overtime, they cannot wait to regather in less than a year in Milan, Italy, for the 2026 Olympics.

"There is something to look forward to with this group, which is great," said Detroit Red Wings captain Dylan Larkin, who was great in all four games for the Americans. "That's the big one. And I know that it's a little bit of a different tournament, different rules, but we really feel like we can play any kind of game on any kind of surface and anywhere against anyone.

"Billy built the team that can do that, and we're confident about that. Would have loved to have this thing keep going and play some more hockey against those guys."

The Americans have a lot to be proud of. Sure, as in the 2010 Olympics, they beat Canada in the "prelims" and then lost when it mattered — in the final.

But they were right there against a titan Team Canada that includes superstars Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and the serial winner that is Sidney Crosby. They poured it on in overtime with several Grade-A chances, including three great looks from captain Auston Matthews that Jordan Binnington robbed. All it took was one icing for Canada to capitalize. Canada coach Jon Cooper kept McDavid on the ice as a means of getting him away from the elite shutdown pair of Faber and Jaccob Slavin.

The U.S. lost the draw, Adam Fox, who struggled mightily all tournament, and Noah Hanifin got crossed up and Matthews, who was superb defensively in last Saturday's win against Canada, lost his assignment.

Unfortunately for him and the Americans, that assignment was McDavid, and the game was over with one torque of McDavid's stick.

"I know for myself personally, it's going to be a goal of mine for the next year," Brady Tkachuk, the United States' best forward in the tournament, said of the Olympics. "Back in Ottawa, it's all about team success there, but it's hard when you're playing here and it's clear in a year's time what we want to accomplish. I'll always remember this feeling when it's next year."

The atmosphere on Thursday night was intoxicating, as thousands of fans dressed in USA sweaters packed TD Garden with chants of "USA! USA! USA!" and, late in the third period and overtime, with "Johnny Hockey! Johnny Hockey! Johnny Hockey!" in honor of Johnny Gaudreau.

McAvoy, who missed the final two games with a shoulder injury and underwent a procedure to treat an infection stemming from an injection he received so he could play on Saturday against Canada, was called into the locker room before the game to fire up the troops by reading the starting lineup.

Earlier in the day, he let his teammates and the world know he was released from the hospital by posting on his Instagram account a picture of him listening to the United States' goal song, Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird," with the caption, "Free as a bird."

Fans cheered throughout "The Star-Spangled Banner." Mike Eruzione, the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" hero, was the United States' honorary captain and emerged for the pregame puck drop (with Canada's honorary captain, Wayne Gretzky) wearing what should have been Gaudreau's USA No. 13 sweater.

When Brady Tkachuk tied the score 1-1 in the first period, his goal celebration and "f— yeah!" to the crowd after his fist-bump fly-by at the bench told you just how wired he was, and how much the Americans wanted to beat Canada.

"This was probably the biggest game a lot of us have played in," Matthews said. "You don't get too many opportunities to wear these colors, to wear this jersey. Winner-take-all situation. So it's disappointing, but I can't be prouder of the group. I thought we competed the whole tournament."

The Americans still haven't won at the top level of international competition since the 1996 World Cup, but this group is close and could get closer in a year's time.

It sure didn't help that one of the top two defensemen in the NHL, Quinn Hughes, had to bow out with an oblique injury. McAvoy set the physical tone in the round-robin win over Canada, so his absence on Thursday loomed large. Still, Slavin and Faber were simply outstanding, as was young Jake Sanderson and Zach Werenski, the left-shot Norris Trophy contender who had to play his off side on Thursday because of McAvoy's loss.

Unfortunately for Team USA, it meant more of Hanifin and Fox, who were on the ice for the tying goal by Sam Bennett and for McDavid's winner. The pace of play seemed to be too much for Fox in all four games, and frankly, he may have put his Olympic roster spot in peril.

But there's so much to look forward to in a year's time.

The Tkachuk brothers will again be the U.S. heartbeats. Jake Guentzel was terrific with three goals, and always gets his nose dirty. Larkin accepted his role by starting the tournament as a fourth-line guy but was elevated to the top six on Thursday night, with Matthew Tkachuk essentially playing the role of cheerleader on the bench. Werenski did not disappoint amid a sensational season for Columbus. And coach Mike Sullivan found himself a shutdown pair on defense.

"Slavin and Faber were tremendous," Sullivan said. "When we put them together, we were hoping that would be a defense pair that would be hard to play against. And they were. They do yeoman's work, they do the thankless jobs. They defend against the best players. Their contributions don't always show up on the highlight reel, but it just adds up to winning. They're glue guys."

"Jacob Slavin might be one of the best defending defensemen in the league, bar none. His mobility, his size, his reach. He defends the rush. He's great at the net front. Brock Faber, in my mind, is an emerging star. How old is he, 22? And the stage wasn't too big for a guy like that. I was so impressed with his maturity. I thought those guys were terrific."

The Americans will need more from others.

Matthews may have been good defensively and may have played his best game of the tournament on Thursday, with assists on goals by Brady Tkachuk and Sanderson, but he didn't score a goal in four games

and, in fact, has now gone 10 consecutive games without a goal, dating to his final six games before the tournament.

And all Toronto Maple Leafs fans know that TD Garden has been a house of horrors for Matthews. He is accustomed to losing do-or-die games in Boston, including three Game 7s in the playoffs.

“It was a pretty even playing field tonight. Could have gone either way,” he said. “(Binnington) made some big saves. Kudos to him. I had some good looks there and he shut the door.”

Jack Hughes was better on Thursday, but he was a giant disappointment in the 4 Nations. So was Kyle Connor, who was scratched on Thursday for Chris Kreider, who played a second straight game.

But this team came together quickly and has the potential to do something special in Italy.

“It was an incredible honor to coach these guys,” Sullivan said. “We could tell early on, as a coaching staff, that these guys really enjoyed being around one another. I think that chemistry carried on to the ice. We felt one of the biggest challenges in tournaments like this is to become a team, and I thought they did an incredible job.”

The cohesion began at the initial team dinner last Monday in Montreal.

Legends in the house!

The U.S. Men’s National Team had dinner with hockey greats—1980 Olympic gold medalists Mike Eruzione & Rob McLanahan, American icon Mike Modano, & Guy Gaudreau, father of Johnny & Matthew.

“This has been a first-class experience, and something that I’ll always remember,” Larkin said. “I’ll always be proud that I was just a part of it, and that I can say right now that I gave it my all for this team and the guys in this room.

“That dinner we had in Montreal, when Bill brought back the legends from the ’80 team and Mike Modano and (Gaudreau’s dad, Guy), like, that was the coolest night of all of this. And then we just continued to make great memories. It was a tremendous group to be around.”

Larkin and the rest of the Americans can’t wait to put on that dark blue USA Hockey sweater again at the 2026 Olympics for their next chance to slay the dragon that always seems to get the best of them: Canada.

The Athletic / Tkachuk brothers, with their 'insatiable appetite to win,' will remain the heartbeats of Team USA

By Fluto Shinzawa- February 22, 2025

BOSTON — It's not a stretch to believe that Brady Tkachuk will make his Olympic debut before he appears in his first NHL playoff game. The Ottawa Senators, currently hanging on to the No. 1 wild-card position in the Eastern Conference, are no certainty to make the postseason.

Tkachuk, meanwhile, is a slam dunk to represent Team USA in the 2026 Winter Games. His thunderous performance in the 4 Nations Face-Off makes him a Stars-and-Stripes lock, alongside his brother Matthew.

"I know, for myself personally, that's going to be a goal of mine for next year," Brady Tkachuk said following the Americans' 3-2 overtime loss to Canada in the tournament final on Thursday at TD Garden. "Back in Ottawa, it's all about team success there. But it's hard when you're playing here. It's all you're thinking about in a year's time what we want to accomplish. I'll always remember this feeling going into next year."

Matthew Tkachuk has already made a name for himself. He won the Stanley Cup last year. He has two 100-point seasons, two more than his little brother. The ex-Calgary Flame was the centerpiece of one of the NHL's most significant blockbuster trades when the Florida Panthers landed him in 2022 for Jonathan Huberdeau, Mackenzie Weegar and a 2025 first-round pick.

In the 4 Nations Face-Off, Brady Tkachuk stepped out of his brother's shadow. He was one of the Americans' three best forwards, along with Auston Matthews and Jake Guentzel.

He and his brother turned the tournament from a question mark into an exclamation point with their one-two fights with Brandon Hagel and Sam Bennett in Montreal. The Tkachuk boys will be the American heartbeats when the stakes rise higher in the Olympics, kicking butts and taking names.

"These guys were such a huge part of the leadership group," Team USA coach Mike Sullivan said. "They're just high-character people. They have an insatiable appetite to win. It's contagious. I think they help our team confidence. I think they helped build our team swagger."

The Americans will have talent in Italy. Matthews, who elevated against Canada in the title game, could be their captain again. Like Matthews, Jack Eichel was a three-zone presence.

Quinn Hughes, unavailable during 4 Nations, will run the offense from the blue line, along with Zach Werenski. Jacob Slavin and Charlie McAvoy will lock things down in front of Connor Hellebuyck, Jake Oettinger, Jeremy Swayman or any other USA goalies who emerge.

But the Tkachuks are singular for their swagger, belligerence and no-you-know-whats given for how they treat their opponents. They are alpha dogs, eager to lead the pack with their sticks, legs, mouths and fists in ways their quieter teammates are not equipped to do. Teams need that degree of spiciness. The Canadians, for example, turned to Sam Bennett and Brandon Hagel to show their teammates that they cared little for the health and safety of others.

It is a pity, then, that Brady Tkachuk has 496 NHL regular-season appearances and none in the games that matter the most. Tkachuk proved he is designed for playoff mayhem.

The 25-year-old was an offensive-zone juggernaut in the most dangerous areas: along the end boards, in the corners and in front of the net. Tkachuk was credited with five hits in the title game. He had several car-crash collisions with Drew Doughty, who has tangled with his brother in NHL showdowns.

Tkachuk did so at less than 100 percent. He left the Sweden game early because of an undisclosed injury. After Thursday's loss, Tkachuk completed his media obligations with his left thigh heavily wrapped.

It didn't take long for Tkachuk, who started the tournament on the No. 3 line, to muscle his way into Sullivan's top six. Tkachuk ran over his opponents with violence and evident joy. He checked with full abandon, using all of his weight and leverage to punish those unlucky enough to land in his sights.

The 6-foot-4, 225-pound strongman also led the Americans with three goals, including the first one for his team on Thursday. He netted his strike with his usual close-quarters doggedness, pulling on his work boots and going to the front of the net.

In the second period, Tkachuk's below-the-line forecheck on Colton Parayko helped pry the puck loose. Moments later, Jake Sanderson gave the Americans a 2-1 lead.

Had his brother been at full strength, the outcome could have been different. But Matthew Tkachuk was nowhere near healthy. Tkachuk played just 6 minutes, 47 seconds. He didn't take a shift in the third period or overtime. Yet Sullivan wanted Tkachuk on the bench.

"Matthew Tkachuk has an impact on our team in such a way that, even if he wasn't 100 percent and we weren't able to utilize him for a lot of the game, his presence on the bench and in the locker room means so much to this group," said Sullivan. "He's all heart. He's a heart-and-soul guy. So is his brother."

Injuries will always be a concern for the Tkachuks, given their style of play. Hitting, hunting pucks in dark-alley ice and fighting is hazardous to your health.

But the Tkachuks know no other way to play. They are practically waving American flags as they enter the fight and encourage their teammates to follow.

They cannot wait for the Olympics.

The Athletic / Which hockey hometown can create the best defensive pairs?

Ranking them 1 to 15

By Peter Baugh- February 23, 2025

We saw hometown chemistry at the 4 Nations Face-Off. Connor McDavid's gold medal-winning goal came off a pass from Mitch Marner: one Toronto area kid to another. Nathan MacKinnon and Sidney Crosby, both from around Halifax, played together throughout the tournament. And then there were the fighting Tkachuk brothers from St. Louis, who now will be known by more sports fans than just those who love hockey.

Last week, The Athletic created a list of forward lines based on players' hometowns. Halifax and Toronto led the way, with trios ranked down to No. 15 Minneapolis. Now it's time to dig into defensive pairs.

As explained in the forward lines story, a player's hometown and birthplace are not necessarily the same. We'll consider a hometown to be the primary place someone grew up. It's where a player brings the Stanley Cup if they get a day with it.

Before digging into defensive pairs, here are some ground rules:

- If a player represents a country, his hometown must be from that country. As was the case with the forward lines, this rule impacts the Hughes family. Jack wasn't on any of the forward lines. He spent most of his childhood living in Toronto, but because he represents the U.S. internationally, he was ineligible for the Toronto line. Defensemen Quinn and Luke Hughes pose the same dilemma. Initially, there was a thought to fudge the rules a bit and just go with their birthplace, but they were born in different states: Quinn in Orlando and Luke in Manchester, New Hampshire. So, sadly, there will not be a Hughes brother defensive pair in this exercise.
- When evaluating a city, we went with anyone whose hometown is within a 40-mile radius as the crow flies. That covers players who are from suburbs of big cities. It also allowed us to group smaller cities together at times.
- A defensive pairing is not punished if it has two right-side defensemen or two left-side defensemen.
- This is a compilation of active NHL defensemen based on their current abilities, not all-time defensemen.

The rankings are all subjective. Here's what we came up with.

1. Calgary

Josh Morrissey-Cale Makar

Makar and Quinn Hughes are in a tier of their own among active NHL defensemen. Being able to pair Makar with Morrissey, who has top-seven Norris finishes each of the past two seasons, immediately makes for a tough-to-top duo.

2. Long Island

Charlie McAvoy-Adam Fox

Long Island is big and full of many towns, but Adam Fox (Jericho, New York) and Charlie McAvoy (Long Beach, New York) are from the same area. They were childhood friends, and now both are among the best defensemen in the league.

There's a case for this pair to be over the Calgary one. Fox has won a Norris, and McAvoy could do the same at some point in his career. Both are excellent defensemen. Still, Makar is a tier above, and Morrissey is not far behind them — if he's behind them at all. That's why Calgary got the slight edge.

3. Greater Vancouver area

Devon Toews-Shea Theodore

Toews and Theodore both played for Team Canada at 4 Nations, though Theodore got hurt in the first game and missed the rest of the tournament. Each has won a Stanley Cup and finished in the top 10 of Norris Trophy voting at some point in his career.

Toews is from Abbotsford, which is about an hour away from Vancouver (depending on traffic). It's all part of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Theodore is from Aldergrove, a community in the Township of Langley, which is less than 10 miles west of Abbotsford.

4. Minneapolis-St. Paul

Ryan McDonagh-Brock Faber

The Minneapolis-St. Paul area is a hockey hotbed, but it was lower than you might have expected on the forward line rankings, checking in at No. 15. Its defensemen make up for that. There were plenty of players to choose from beyond McDonagh and Faber, including Brady Skjei, K'Andre Miller, Justin Faulk and Nick Leddy.

Faber and McDonagh are at opposite ends of their career, which makes this pairing fun. The 22-year-old Faber is ascending and showed the world how good he is through his performance at 4 Nations. McDonagh, meanwhile, is nearing 36 but still having a strong year for the Tampa Bay Lightning. Plus-minus is a flawed stat, but it never hurts to lead the league in it, which McDonagh currently does at plus-31, as well as being second among active NHLers at plus-277 for his career.

5. Toronto

Evan Bouchard-Alex Pietrangelo

Toronto is the only city to have a top-five forward line (Marner-McDavid-Robert Thomas was second) and a top-five defensive pair. Like McDonagh and Faber, this pair consists of a rising defenseman (Bouchard) and an aging one still playing at a high level (Pietrangelo). Pietrangelo made the initial 4 Nations roster but sat out of the tournament because of injury. Bouchard could be a candidate to make the Olympic team.

6. Helsinki

Esa Lindell-Miro Heiskanen

Interestingly, Finland had two cities in the forward line story (Tampere and Turku) and Helsinki wasn't one of them. Well, the Finnish capital now gets some representation with a pair of Dallas Stars defensemen. Heiskanen is among the league's elite, and Lindell is a steady presence for the Stars.

7. Detroit

Zach Werenski-Cam Fowler

Werenski has arguably been the biggest part of the Columbus Blue Jackets' resurgent season. He should be in the Norris finalist conversation at the end of the year, and he led the 4 Nations tournament with six points. Fowler has averaged nearly 23 minutes of ice time a night since getting traded from the Anaheim

Ducks to the St. Louis Blues. At 33, he's perhaps not what he was at his peak, but he's still capable of playing a lot and chipping in offense.

8. Bern, Switzerland

Roman Josi-J.J. Moser

Josi is a Norris Trophy winner and has a resume that speaks for itself, but Bern still needed another capable defenseman to make this list. It has one in Moser. The 24-year-old had a solid start to the year in his own right before injury interrupted his season. He should be back after the break and could be a big part of Tampa Bay's playoff hopes.

9. London, Ontario

Dylan DeMelo-Drew Doughty

Doughty is 35 and not the perennial Norris contender he once was, but he was still good enough to represent Canada at 4 Nations. DeMelo, meanwhile, is putting together an underrated season. He is plus-26 through 56 games while logging 21:26 a night for a strong Winnipeg Jets team. His underlying numbers are good, too. He has a positive offensive and defensive rating, according to colleague Dom Luszczyszyn's model.

10. Malmö and Helsingborg, Sweden

Hampus Lindholm-Rasmus Andersson

Finding Swedish defensive pairs was difficult, which was a surprise given how many good defensemen are from the country. A lot of their hometowns are pretty spread out. Victor Hedman, for example, is from Örnsköldsvik, and no other NHL players are from near there. Rasmus Dahlin's hometown of Lidköping is a little too far out of Gothenburg for him to count for that area. Erik Karlsson played in Gothenburg, but his hometown is the much smaller Landsbro.

Andersson's hometown of Malmö and Lindholm's hometown of Helsingborg are two distinct cities, but they are in the same county and within 40 miles of each other as the crow flies. Both players are proven and worthy of a nod on this list.

11. Edmonton

Colton Parayko-Jared Spurgeon

Parayko, who is coming off a 4 Nations championship, already has 12 goals this year and is on pace for a career high in points. Spurgeon missed most of last season due to injury but has been healthy most of this season. He's responsible and has averaged more than 20 minutes every season of his career since 2010-11, his rookie year. Brett Kulak also has a case to make this pairing. He's averaging a career-high 19:55 of ice time this year on a strong Edmonton Oilers team.

12. Yaroslavl, Russia

Vladislav Gavrikov-Ivan Provorov

Russia has a loaded group of forwards, but its defense is a little more sparse. There are no superstar Russian defensemen, but there are still plenty of good players, including Gavrikov and Provorov, who both log heavy minutes in hard situations. Both are in line for pay raises, too, as pending unrestricted free agents.

13. Montreal

Mike Matheson-Kris Letang

Letang has enjoyed a storied career, and his pedigree gets him onto this list, even if he's in the midst of a down season. He's nearly 38 and is in decline. Matheson had a career-high 62 points in 2023-24. His scoring rate is down this season, but he's still a solid player on an inexperienced Canadiens club.

14. Chicago

Lane Hutson-Alex Vlasic

This line is relatively unproven, which is why it checks in at No. 15. Hutson is one of the game's best young offensive-defensemen and will be in Calder contention at season's end. Vlasic, meanwhile, is getting settled in the NHL, playing 23:47 a night this year. Not bad for a 23-year-old.

15. Ottawa

Brandt Clarke-MacKenzie Weegar

Clarke is having a breakout season, and Weegar has been strong for Calgary. This pair had an argument to be in the top 15.

The Athletic / NHL awards WATCH: Quinn Hughes or Cale Makar for the Norris?

By Dom Luszczyzyn- February 23, 2025

Throughout the season I'll be breaking down the numbers behind the race for each major player award: the Hart, the Norris, the Calder, the Selke, the Vezina, the Art Ross and the Rocket Richard. Numbers of course aren't everything, but they add much-needed context to the awards race and can help shine a light on players deserving of more recognition while adding caveats to other players that may have some warts. This post will present the top 10 for each category based on a set criteria of guidelines. There is plenty of room for discussion and debate within (and outside) those guidelines.

Fresh off the 4 Nations Face-Off, it's time to check in for another Awards Watch.

While there hasn't been a whole lot of change in the new year, especially at the top, it's still worthwhile to see how the contenders are progressing — and whether any challengers have emerged.

Aside from the Vezina Trophy, each race is still close enough that the finish could be exciting down the stretch. Will the current leaders hold on, or will they be usurped at the last minute?

Based on my interpretation of the numbers, here's how each key race currently shakes out.

Data as of Feb. 9

Hart Trophy

Given to the player judged to be the most valuable to his team.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by Net Rating, adjusted by position.

There are a lot of great choices for the Hart this season and it's hard to go truly wrong.

Leon Draisaitl is the current leader in Net Rating at plus-20.3 for good reason. He's putting up a career-best all-around season as Edmonton's primary driver — no small feat on that team. Draisaitl leads the league in goals with 40, is second in points with 83 and has played some shockingly Selke-calibre defense. With a plus-4.6 Defensive Rating, Draisaitl would be a very worthy Selke candidate for anyone willing to look past his lack of penalty-kill time.

The fact Draisaitl is scoring as much as he is on top of that is special — the kind of combination that usually puts Auston Matthews near the top of this list. This year, it's Draisaitl providing the rare blend of lethal scoring and two-way ability. He's been a world-class 200-foot player.

As good as Draisaitl has been, however, he's not quite running away with things just yet. There's still time for players to make things interesting.

Could a defenseman win (or just be nominated!) for the first time in over two decades? Quinn Hughes has the narrative for it given how well he's played and how poor the rest of his team has been. But Zach Werenski has a similar argument to be made in Columbus and Cale Makar has been excellent, too.

Could a goalie win for the first time in a decade? Connor Hellebuyck is making a strong case of his own given he's saved 28 goals above expected this season. By pure value, that's eight goals clear of Draisaitl. Anyone wishing to go the goalie route this year wouldn't be wrong to do so. Hellebuyck ranks seventh here, though, because his value lands in the 99.8th percentile of goalies. That's lower than the six skaters above him compared to other skaters. Comparing goalie value to player value is tricky, but that method aligns with how infrequently goalies win MVP — they need to be head-and-shoulders above the field. Is Hellebuyck far enough ahead?

There are also other forwards who can challenge Draisaitl. Nathan MacKinnon is leading the league in points while Nikita Kucherov (with an improved defensive game!) is leading in points per game and primary points. Both would be worthy options. And then of course there's still Connor McDavid, who sits just outside the top five even in a down year. Don't count him out — the best player in the world can still surge down the stretch.

Draisaitl is the top choice at the moment, but some worthy competitors can still make this race interesting.

Norris Trophy

Given to the defenseman who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-round ability in the position.

Criteria: Defensemen who play top-pairing minutes, ranked by Net Rating.

Hughes has been the best defenseman in the league this season. Again.

Per 82 games, he's on pace for 103 points, impressively doing so on a team struggling to generate any offense around him. Hughes leads his team in points by a hefty margin, producing despite a degree of difficulty the other top candidates aren't bothered by. That, along with some strong underlying numbers, brings Hughes' Net Rating to plus-28.1 per 82 games. That's the best mark in the league for a defenseman. It shows in his tracked data from Corey Sznajder as well. When it comes to creating offense and moving the puck up ice, Hughes is always at the top or right near it.

The question with Hughes is how much missing eight games should hurt his chances. To me, that's not enough time missed to tilt the scales elsewhere. Some may disagree, though, given Makar isn't that far behind Hughes. Makar is on pace for 32 goals and 91 points and has been stronger defensively than Hughes while playing tougher minutes. He's been available for 100 percent of Colorado's games, giving him the current Net Rating lead at plus-18.8. That's 2.7 goals up on Hughes. Per 82 games, Makar is at plus-27, 1.1 goals back of Hughes.

Some folks out there will discredit Makar for how he does without MacKinnon — or simply because he has a player of MacKinnon's caliber to lean on, which Hughes does not. While Makar's performance away from MacKinnon does poke some holes in his case, it is important to not be so decisive when apportioning credit.

The elite results Makar and MacKinnon earn together (62 percent xG and 61 percent of actual goals) aren't 100 percent because of MacKinnon — Makar deserves equal credit for the beautiful music they make together. Similarly, the lesser results Makar posts away from MacKinnon aren't 100 percent because of Makar either, especially since MacKinnon's results away from Makar are also not great. Context matters here and it's clear Makar's job when playing away from MacKinnon leans more toward the defensive side on a team that isn't very deep at forward. And it's noteworthy that his plus-5.2 Defensive Rating is highest among the top 10 defenders here. In terms of all-around ability, Makar has a strong argument.

After those two, Werenski is having a marvelous season and is the clear-cut No. 3. He has a real shot at challenging the top two and has been incredible this season at both ends of the ice. Werenski has entrenched himself as a franchise defenseman and a no-doubt top-five defender. His on-ice metrics are a shade behind Hughes and Makar, even when accounting for team quality, but the fact he's kept up with their production is meaningful.

Those three should be on every ballot, but after them is where things get a little murky.

Evan Bouchard, despite what some of his detractors say, is having another elite season cementing himself as one of the game's best. While his personal production may be down, Bouchard has showcased an improved defensive game where he's cut down on his chances and goals against. Adam Fox is here as usual and it feels like his season is flying under the radar given the state of the team around him. Fox is putting up career-high marks across the board in his relative on-ice impacts and has been a shining beacon amid an otherwise dim season for the Rangers. The team earns 57 percent of actual goals and 56 percent of expected goals with Fox on the ice this year, the latter of which is a career-best mark for Fox.

Josh Morrissey, Rasmus Dahlin and Victor Hedman are staples worthy of consideration. As is Mattias Ekholm, Edmonton's defensive conscience next to Bouchard. But the real surprise here is Thomas Harley. If you were shocked by his call-up to Team Canada, make sure you take in some Dallas hockey down the stretch — especially as he fills in for the injured Miro Heiskanen. Harley's game has taken a big step as he moves up the lineup and his impacts at five-on-five have been extremely strong. He's a puck-moving force.

Selke Trophy

Given to the forward who best excels in the defensive aspects of the game.

Criteria: Forwards who play over 16 minutes per game, receive 15 percent of their team's short-handed minutes and face top-line forward competition, ranked by their Defensive Rating.

There's still a big question at the top of the Selke ballot: which Panther should it be?

Should it be Aleksander Barkov, the guy who won last year and has always been Florida's defensive leader? Or should it be Sam Reinhart, Barkov's wingman who has arguably had a stronger defensive season?

In a sense, the Selke situation is basically a defensive version of the Hart argument in Edmonton. We know Barkov is the best defensive forward in the world, just like we know Connor McDavid is the best player in the world. But this year, it's the sidekicks that have been more impressive and maybe they deserve their flowers for that.

Between Barkov and Reinhart, it's Reinhart with the stronger expected goals against rate (1.75 per 60 to Barkov's 1.96) and it's Reinhart with the stronger goals against rate too (1.68 to 1.77). Reinhart's relative impact on expected goals is even stronger thanks to the time Barkov missed where Reinhart continued to excel defensively. That's what leads to Reinhart's decisive 2.2-goal lead when it comes to Defensive Rating, a gap that wouldn't be made up with Barkov playing as many games either. And for those that view the Selke as an all-around award, Reinhart has the lead there as well with a slightly stronger expected and actual goals percentage.

It's hard not to go with the incumbent, especially for an award that often comes down to reputation. Picking Barkov wouldn't be the wrong answer given his impact. But Reinhart has been so good defensively this year and it would be a shame not to honor that.

That's my top two. After that it's about detangling more teammates who have been shutdown forces. Anthony Cirelli and Brandon Hagel have been awesome in Tampa Bay, though not quite to the same degree as the Florida duo. Tough minutes, defensive zone draws, killing penalties — the Lightning duo have been incredible. Tampa Bay has allowed just 2.09 expected goals against per 60 with Cirelli on the ice while Hagel isn't far behind. They've made life easier for Tampa Bay's offensive minds and at least one deserves proper representation on the ballot.

After that quartet, there are still some other great options. Jordan Staal (my only exception to the 16 minutes per game rule) and Phillip Danault have been as strong as usual. Ditto for Nico Hischier, who is

becoming a Selke mainstay. Anton Lundell is following in his captain's footsteps. And the Vegas duo of Mark Stone and Jack Eichel have been dominant, too.

There are a lot of strong choices, but the top of the ballot starts in Florida.

Calder Trophy

Given to the player selected as the most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL.

Criteria: Rookie skaters ranked by Net Rating, adjusted by position.

Based on Net Rating, there is no gap between Macklin Celebrini and Lane Hutson. Picking between the two will be a challenge.

Both have at least 40 points on the season — an impressive feat for both considering Celebrini managed it in 45 games while Hutson is doing it as a defenseman. Both players are major offensive catalysts for their teams with equally strong relative impacts at five-on-five, though Hutson does give a bit more back defensively. Both dazzle beyond just scoring, too, with some electric highlight reels that hint at some tantalizing upside. Both Celebrini and Hutson are already stars in this league, setting a course for superstardom.

But they have not been the best rookies this season.

That honor should belong to Dustin Wolf, who is putting himself in the Vezina conversation as a rookie goaltender. Wolf has almost single-handedly dragged a very poor Flames team into the West wild-card race — that's how good he's been. The Calder should be his to lose.

Comparing a skater's value to a goalie's value is a challenge. When it comes to awards voting, the difference between the two often has to be overwhelmingly in the goalie's favor to make up for the difference in opportunity the goalie has to accrue value. Wolf has a strong case with how he's played this season.

Wolf's 10.9 goals saved above expected is a top-10 mark among starters, landing in the 85th percentile among all goalies. By that same rubric, Celebrini's and Hutson's Net Ratings land in the 65th percentile among skaters. Apples to apples, Wolf comes out ahead by a significant margin. For Wolf to land in the 65th percentile, his GSAx would have to be closer to 5.3.

That difference certainly feels overwhelming enough to have Wolf as the current Calder front-runner.

Vezina Trophy

Given to the goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position.

Criteria: Goaltenders who have played half of their team's games or more, ranked by goals saved above expected courtesy of Evolving Hockey and MoneyPuck.

Not much new here: The Vezina is still Hellebuyck's to lose. There should be no question about who the league's best goalie is. Hellebuyck now has a .925 on the season and has saved 28 goals above expected, both of which are league-best marks. He is by far the biggest reason the Jets are a top-two team this season and his year-to-year consistency at this level is nothing short of remarkable.

The gap between Hellebuyck and the next-best goalie has closed a bit, though, with Logan Thompson entering the chat. Since the start of the new year, Thompson has saved 11.7 goals above expected to Hellebuyck's 3.5, according to Evolving Hockey. The difference between the two is now just under five goals. It's not enough of a surge to make the Vezina race interesting yet, but at the very least, it makes Thompson the clear-cut No. 2 option after Hellebuyck.

After that is where things get interesting. Two goalies on bad teams — Lukas Dostal and Joey Daccord — have admirably held their own despite difficulties in front of them. Ditto for Igor Shesterkin on a middling Rangers team. Mackenzie Blackwood, Andrei Vasilevskiy and Joseph Woll have been rock-solid for their respective clubs, and rookie Wolf is turning heads in a major way.

All very worthy candidates — but they're fighting for third. The top two look fairly set.

Art Ross Trophy

Given to the player who leads the National Hockey League in scoring points at the end of the regular season.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season point total.

This race will probably go down to the wire and will probably be between MacKinnon and Kucherov, both of whom are projected for 126 points. MacKinnon is the current leader with 87, but it's actually Kucherov who's leading in points per game at 1.58. Will the final 27 games be enough for Kucherov to make up the five-point gap? It'll be tight.

Over in Edmonton, Draisaitl now looks like the favorite to challenge the top two. He's surged over the last month while McDavid has fallen off pace a bit (and missed time to suspension, too). Draisaitl is only four points back of MacKinnon with two games in hand, and with the way he's playing this year, there's a decent chance he can continue to produce above his projected output.

Rocket Richard Trophy

Given to the NHL's top goal scorer.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season goal total.

Draisaitl pretty much has this one in the bag. He's already seven goals up on the next closest player, William Nylander, and has a stronger track record, too. He's projected to win by 10 goals for that reason and, with a projected 57 goals, is the only player this year expected to eclipse the 50-goal mark.

The Athletic / Amid the 4 Nations noise, Canada reclaims its throne as ‘the king of hockey’

By Dan Robson- February 23, 2025

They crossed the 49th parallel, from Manitoba into North Dakota — and drove through day and night — across eight states and more than 3,000 kilometers, according to the Canadian odometer on their Nissan Murano.

Two canceled flights meant they were desperate. So they piled into a car, stopping only for gas. And, despite a two-hour detour through Milwaukee, off a middle-of-the-night wrong turn, they made it to Boston in 30 hours.

They were five among the thousands of Canadians who lined up outside TD Garden hours before the start of the NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off final between Canada and the United States.

“We’re here for the Maple Leaf,” said Matt McLeod. And they were there for their childhood friend Seth Jarvis, who was living his dream of playing for Canada.

But at the most hyped international hockey game in more than a decade, everyone had their reasons to care. And beyond the 60 minutes and overtime, it felt like there was so much more than a win at stake.

With more than a decade of built-up tension between the two rivals, heat on the ice was inevitable. But for many, the championship game wasn’t about bragging rights alone. A looming trade war between the United States and Canada, following tariff threats by President Donald Trump and repeated claims that he’d like the sovereign neighbor to become the country’s 51st state, created an unparalleled level of hostility between the two nations.

Canadian fans booed the American national anthem when the teams met in a round-robin match in Montreal, which was followed by three fights in the first nine seconds of the game.

It was impossible to ignore the wider implications, especially when the U.S. team’s general manager Bill Guerin said his players used the political tensions as inspiration and invited Trump to attend the final. Before the championship, Trump encouraged the Americans while taking another shot at Canada becoming the 51st state and referring to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a governor.

Outside TD Garden, that tension was evident hours before the opening face off.

“Welcome to the USA, Canada’s 11th Province,” read a massive sign carried by Ian MacKinnon, as fans dressed in Canada and USA jerseys shuffled in a queue that stretched down Causeway Street. He’s an American, by way of grandparents who first immigrated to Nova Scotia. MacKinnon doesn’t care much about sports, but he biked there with his sign in hopes of making a point and maybe offering a touch of levity.

“The way the series started with fist fights in the first 10 seconds, I felt maybe tonight I could make people smile,” MacKinnon said.

And most people did, while some tossed light jabs.

“51st state!” one man yelled as he passed in line.

“U-S-A! U-S-A!” chanted another.

One fan tried to rip the sign from MacKinnon’s hand, but he held firm.

In the concourse, American fans posed with Mark Goggin, who'd painted his face red and white, with temporary tattoos of a cartoon moose and beaver on each cheek. Goggin crossed the border from his home in Windsor to catch a flight from Detroit with his son. As innocent and playful as most of the interactions between the fans were, Goggin felt the wider implications that the game carried seemed somewhat lost on his American counterparts. They didn't seem to appreciate just how serious Canadians have taken the threats and taunts, he said. It might be fun and games to them, but in Canada the aggression has spurred a rush of patriotism.

"Canadians are so pumped to win this game. Because we can't beat Trump, right?" Goggin said. "It's the only thing we can beat them at — hockey."

His eyes reddened as he described the emotion many Canadians carried into the final.

"It's so big for Canadians," Goggin said. "It's more than a game."

Mark Goggin's rooting interests were easily discerned. (Dan Robson / The Athletic)

Harjinder Sidhu flew from Winnipeg to attend the game with his brother and his 5-year-old nephew, who traveled from Edmonton. The 30-year-old said the outside context matters.

"Canada will never be the 51st state. ... It's very disrespectful," he said. "Our soldiers have died next to their soldiers in wars, which we do happily because they're our brothers. But that brother is acting a little too aggressive right now. And today we'll show them who's the king of hockey."

For more than a century, hockey has been Canada's game. But it has long been anticipated that the Americans would catch up and possibly surpass Canada. Recent trends underscore that reality. The majority of Canadian NHLers play for American teams. And as has been pointed out many times, no Canadian team has won a Stanley Cup since 1993.

That tension filled the TD Garden too. It hung uncomfortably when Wayne Gretzky, hockey's greatest icon, stepped onto the ice representing Canada in a pregame ceremony wearing a suit, to respectful stick taps and cheers. Mike Eruzione, captain of the 1980 Miracle on Ice team, followed to a riotous roar wearing a U.S.A. jersey — fist-bumping the American players and waving his hands to pump up the crowd as they chanted "U.S.A."

It wasn't lost on many Canadians watching that Gretzky, star of the famed 1987 Canada Cup winning team, attended President Trump's election victory party at Mar-a-Lago and his recent inauguration ceremony.

A smattering of boos greeted the Canadian national anthem, but a chorus rose alongside singer Chantal Kreviazuk, who made her own comment on the moment by changing the lyrics in a verse from "in all of us command" to "that only us command." Kreviazuk later posted on Instagram that she believed Canadians needed to stand up and use their voices in the face of a "potentially consequential moment."

"We should express our outrage in the face of any abuses of power," she wrote.

A hockey game happened, and a thrilling one, with a crowd heavily on the American side.

But after the most dramatic show of international men's hockey in more than a decade — sealed by Connor McDavid's overtime winning goal — it was Canadians piling on the ice and embracing in the stands. American fans streamed out into the concourse as "O Canada" played once more, to fireworks around a giant Canadian flag. The red-and-white jerseys filled the lower bowl, surrounded by empty seats.

Drew Doughty sang as loud as he could. It had been so long since he'd last felt this moment, and he didn't know if he'd ever feel it again.

And later, in the locker room, the Canadian players belted “We Are The Champions” by Queen, Molson Canadian and Moët sloshing on the floor. Their reign as the world’s greatest, secured for at least another year.

Above, in the concourse, a chant of “Can-na-Da, Ca-na-da” echoed as fans marched toward the exits, and out onto Causeway Street.

A woman in a grey sweater with a U.S. flag on it shouted after them: “You’ll be the 51st state soon.”

But no one bothered to listen.

As the champagne dried on the locker room floor, and other Canadian players reveled in the hallway en route to the team’s afterparty at a nearby bar, Mark Stone acknowledged that the political tension weighed on the team throughout the series.

“I definitely read and saw everything, Saturday to tonight,” Stone said. “It’s hard to stay off that stuff, the way the world is with social media. This game meant a lot to us, a lot to our country, and we’re proud to put on that jersey and get a win for our country.”

ESPN / Has international hockey replaced the NHL All-Star Game?

By Greg Wyshynski- February 21, 2025

BOSTON -- The 4 Nations Face-Off has emerged as a transformative moment for the NHL.

"Nothing's done more for hockey in a decade than what this tournament's done," Team Canada coach Jon Cooper said.

What was supposed to be a midseason appetizer for the 2026 Winter Olympics has evolved into a transcendent event for hockey, which has lacked a best-on-best event since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. That was never more apparent than the first U.S. vs Canada showdown in Montreal, which produced three fights in the first nine seconds of the game followed by an elite representation of the sport as played by two bitter rivals.

The audience was massive -- with 9.3 million viewers, it was the most-watched non-Olympic hockey game ever in the United States. The hype was something the NHL hadn't seen in recent memory. People who don't usually talk about hockey were suddenly talking about hockey.

"The game is in a better place because that game existed," Cooper said.

Now that the 4 Nations Face-Off was a game-changer, how will the NHL capitalize on it -- and what comes next for its midseason events?

THE NHL HAS ANNOUNCED what is on the way in 2026. The All-Star Weekend, which took a hiatus in favor of 4 Nations this year, will return at the New York Islanders' UBS Arena next February. That will serve as a bon voyage event ahead of the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy, which mark the return of NHL players for the first time since 2014.

The 2026 Olympics begin what the NHL and the NHL Players' Association hope will be a regular cadence of international best-on-best events. NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Marty Walsh announced last week the next World Cup of Hockey is scheduled for 2028. Then come the 2030 Winter Olympics, and then potentially another World Cup and so on.

"We couldn't be more excited about making a reality: Olympics, World Cups, Olympics, World Cups on a regular schedule of the best hockey players in the world representing their countries," Bettman said.

"We know the full-blown World Cup is going to be sensational."

Sources told ESPN that the future of the NHL All-Star Game beyond next season has yet to be determined.

The NHL All-Star Game isn't going anywhere -- sources said its status as a tentpole event and its history within the league make it an important part of the league's slate of events. But All-Star Weekend's cadence and format beyond next season hasn't been determined. Logically, it could be held in years when there isn't a best-on-best event. Perhaps the league continues to double up with the All-Star Game and the Olympics, like it is doing in 2026.

ALL-STAR GAMES are in a transient place in the sports world right now -- that's not just a function of the success of the 4 Nations Face-Off.

While the NHL's midseason tournament was being widely praised, the NBA All-Star Weekend received criticism from fans and players. Draymond Green called the game's format "absurd" and said it existed "because ratings are down and the game is bad."

The effort of the NHL's players in its best-on-best tournament was in stark contrast with basketball's midseason classic.

"You can go on an NBA court and go through the motions. You can't do that in hockey," P.K. Subban said on "Get Up." "The culture of our sport, you have to play it with passion. That's what fans are investing in."

While that's true, the NHL All-Star Game isn't exactly USA vs. Canada for the 4 Nations title, either.

"Different event, obviously. I don't remember any fights in the All-Star Games," Winnipeg Jets defenseman Josh Morrissey said. "There's definitely a place to have both. From what I've heard, that's the plan in the future. And I think both can be exciting."

THE ALL-STAR GAME brings some virtues that these international tournaments do not. The World Cup of Hockey will be awarded through a host city bidding process. The All-Star Game brings the world's best players to markets that may never host a World Cup game. It doesn't just spread the wealth among NHL cities -- it does the same among players.

"The one thing about this tournament is 'Where's Leon Draisaitl?' Or Nikita Kucherov?' Go down the list of guys that aren't here that you do get to see in an All-Star Game because those guys are special talents," Cooper said. "Maybe there's something down the road where everybody gets to play, and that would be super cool."

The players at the 4 Nations Face-Off uniformly agreed that there's room for both best-on-best battles and All-Star games in the NHL.

"Obviously this brings out real emotions when you get to play these meaningful games," Sweden's Jesper Bratt said. "The All-Star Game has its cool things to it, too, and I think fans appreciate that part of it: to see the best individual players from each division and each team to participate in a skill competition."

Team USA's Jack Hughes, Bratt's teammate on the New Jersey Devils, said he's made some great memories at the All-Star Game.

"That's always fun for me personally, just because it's not as extreme as this. Obviously, you get to spend more time with your family and your friends and get to enjoy that with them. I think that's a great event," he said. "But as a hockey player for sure, [4 Nations] is the elite of the elite. Getting to play against the best players and represent your country. It means something to everyone on the ice."

Vincent Trocheck said the experience is different for every player at the All-Star Game.

"I've only played in two, and they've been extremely special to me. Every time I've been able to go, sharing that with my family is really cool. So those are ... awesome weekends, but something like this is just different," said the New York Rangers center, who played for Team USA. "It's more meaningful. It's more emotional. Stuff like this is what you dream of as a kid. So coming to a tournament like this is something that you'll never forget. You can't match it."

THE NHL PLAYERS deserve credit, having pushed for more best-on-best opportunities since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

"Whether it's Team Canada, the U.S., Sweden, Finland, the other nations in the future, if there's more playing in these events when you put on your country's uniform, it just means something special," Morrissey said. "It's a different feeling, and you can't replicate that in any other way."

After the success of 4 Nations, everything is on the table. Could the All-Star Game become something that hues a little closer to nation vs. nation? Could those years between the Olympics and World Cup

produce more international events, be it a 4 Nations Face-Off or a "summit series" between the U.S. and Canada?

The 4 Nations Face-Off has broadened the possibilities.

"Look to soccer. They have so much international play that gets so much attention. We're not soccer, as far as a global game, but we're not that far behind," Ron Hainsey of the NHLPA said. "That's the long-term goal here ... where fans look forward to these players representing their countries on a regular basis."

Shutting down the regular season for international events isn't without its risks or its critics. The 4 Nations Face-Off saw a handful of injuries, most notably to Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy, who was hospitalized Monday with an infection in his right shoulder and a significant injury to his AC joint.

"I don't know how the NHL teams feel about it, because guys are going so hard out there and we still have a quarter of the season left," New Jersey Devils center Jack Hughes said. "But I think the guys inside the locker room have extreme care for this and are really, really enjoying this."

Canada star Connor McDavid agreed less is more for international tournaments.

"I'm not sure you could do this every single year. It's been pretty taxing. Obviously, we see guys going down and getting hurt," McDavid said. "But it goes to show how much guys care about playing for the country, how much pride they play with while they're wearing the jersey."

"I think with the Olympics and the World Cup, I think we'll get enough."

The World Cup of Hockey returns in 2028, although its final form has yet to be determined. There will be eight teams representing eight nations, without the "melded" teams from 2016 like Team North America and Team Europe. The NHL will not partner with the International Ice Hockey Federation for the World Cup, instead negotiating with other professional leagues themselves in order to populate teams like Germany and Switzerland with players.

There will be a bidding process for host cities, and that process will be open to European locations.

"The Olympics provides a good model for us in terms of how long the break will be for games in Europe," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said.

Of course, the biggest issue around the 2026 Olympics and 2028 World Cup is whether Russia will be included, as it remains banned from international play through 2026 by the IIHF because of its invasion of Ukraine.

"I'd love to see our Russian players playing in these tournaments. Again, they're incredible hockey players," Walsh said. "The issues are political and it is not political as far as the NHLPA, it's the world politics that we have to get through and I'm hoping that as we get closer to the Olympics, as we get closer to the World Cup, we will start seeing the Russian athletes back in the competition."

THE 4 NATIONS FACE-OFF showed best-on-best hockey can cross over to the mainstream. But the conditions might not be there to capture lightning in a bottle a second time.

The geopolitical undercurrents to the USA vs. Canada rivalry heightened its passions. The tournament featured the first opportunity for a generation of stars -- McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, the Tkachuk brothers and Auston Matthews, among others -- to represent their countries in a best-on-best event.

And what, exactly, do they do for an encore? Four fights in eight seconds next time?

"The expectations were high. I think the tournament's done a good job of setting that bar and going beyond it," Team USA's Brock Nelson said.

The 4 Nations Face-Off was meant to be the appetizer for the Olympics. Based on its success, the NHL needs to capitalize on the moment.

[Sportsnet.ca / Stock WATCH: Risers and fallers for Team Canada's Olympic roster](#)

By Justin Bourne- February 22, 2025

I'm not sure there's ever been two more well-played hockey games than the two Canada-USA just played. Hockey is an impossible sport, where defensively you're constantly between reads, elite players can make you pay, and so players tend to err on the side of defensive caution. That meant in a high stakes game you had the most elite players in the world committing to defence first, and you had to find a way to score somehow, which was almost impossible.

Knowing the margin for error was roughly nil, a lot of the below is based on the comfort level felt with certain players on the ice in big moments. Who stepped up? Who looked unafraid? Who looked hesitant? And, based on those factors, how does it affect Team Canada's outlook for the Olympic roster just one year from now?

Here at Sportsnet, we've got plenty of people doing reflections of the championship game. Allow me to be the first to jump off from this event, and judge whether players saw their stock go up, or down, after the 4 Nations Face-Off.

FORWARDS

Stock way, way up. Easily Canada's brightest surprise from the event, as he was perceived as a fringe selection and didn't score in the NHL for more than a month after being selected to the team. From fighting Brady Tkachuk on his first shift of the tournament, to throwing the biggest hits of any Canadian, to scoring a monster goal in the final, Bennett was a guy Canadians were glad to see throw his leg over the boards when his number got called.

Stock way down. I saw him as a PK and shut down guy for Canada, but they barely had to kill any penalties the entire event (this will be different under IIHF refs), and failed to shut down Sweden and Finland when they got ahead. Not that Cirelli was directly to blame, but he just wasn't particularly impactful at any moment of the tournament.

Stock unchanged. Five points in four games, including big points at big moments (created the OT winner, buried the empty net game clincher), and he was a key part of Canada's only line that was consistently effective in the final game. Until the McDavid line starting coming on, there were long stretches where it felt like if it wasn't going to be Crosby and MacKinnon, it wasn't going to be anyone.

Stock up, a tiny bit. Hagel was one of the guys I thought Jon Cooper didn't use enough. He actually had real drive while chasing down bodies and pucks, and wasn't afraid to play in the traffic. But the fight, the energy, the quotes, and the passion made Canadians love him more. If he can maintain his play in the NHL over the next year he's a no brainer to bring back.

Stock down, but felt like he ran out of runway. He didn't get a ton of opportunity and at first seemed overwhelmed by the moment. He looked hesitant and at times light. But...he got a lot of puck touches in the championship game, started to get more involved, and it felt like he was coming on. He's got his work cut out for him to keep that roster spot next year, but this experience would have been invaluable for him. Don't count Jarvis out of Italy just yet.

Stock down. Wasn't used a ton, and wasn't noticeable when he was. Not that he was bad, he just didn't have any moments. If there are roster spots available, he's going to have to fend off a lot of people whose stock went up by not being there (namely Mark Scheifele, Tom Wilson, and Zach Hyman).

Stock maybe, impossibly, up a bit? Led the tournament in goals but more than that, MacKinnon was involved in winning pucks back and noticeably changed the flow of the game in a positive direction every time he was out there. About 45-50 minutes into the championship game I was listing forwards I've liked for Canada in a group chat and '29' felt like the only number to write down without hesitation before needing to really think about it.

Brad Marchand, Boston Bruins

Stock down physically, but Canadians probably like him more. Was one of the first six players named to Team Canada back in June before his season had a chance to play out. He probably would've made it on merit alone even if he wasn't named early, but unfortunately he just looked slow when the games got fast, and so he wasn't used a ton. He's been a great Canadian player though, and it was nice to have a veteran around who didn't seem rattled by the pressure.

Stock unchanged, but with a glimmer of hope. He looked by far the best he ever has in a big game, and tallied two big moments in two overtimes. Great to see him play his regular game in an irregular moment like that. I say his stock is unchanged, as he played three 60-minute games (including the first one against the USA) without being impactful and slid down the lineup, but had some big moments and worked his way back to the McDavid line in the end. So his stock is level, with hope that he can consistently be the version we saw in the last game.

Like MacKinnon, McDavid's stock is up somehow. I've watched years of an excellent Marner and Auston Matthews get shut down in the playoffs by good defence. But against all the defensive attention possible, McDavid put up five points in four games (best among forwards, tied with Sid) and got the championship OT winner. He couldn't get it going at times in the final game, but he never stops pushing.

Stock down, though marginally. I just think he's so, so good, that him contributing only a couple points despite playing with McDavid was probably the floor of what I was hoping to see from Point. He's a gamer, and he'll be back.

Stock unchanged, if down like one per cent. It was stock up on all the little things he does, from forechecking to finishing checks to thinking his way around the rink. But he's been one of the world's best goal scorers the past few years, and he played in Canada's top six, so I was hoping he'd shoot one in the net for them.

Stock down a bit. Does all the right things, is hard on the puck, but he seemed a little slowed down, and already didn't have much extra speed to give.

DEFENCEMEN

Stock up a hair. Crazy to say for a guy who's regarded as the best defenceman in the world, but he broke pucks out with fakes, made guys miss, and completely changed the complexion of how his opponents had to defend. Wasn't feeling good and still played almost 30 minutes in the final, far and away the most of any Canadian.

Stock way up. Only played three games thanks to the flu, but he never hesitated, was up in the rush, defended hard, and was just super impressive.

Stock up a titch. Long and lanky defender who threw bombs at J.T. Miller, fired pucks at Connor Hellebuyck, and skated up with the rush whenever he could. Had his worst game in the final, but for the whole tournament, he ended being a superb selection. He will be a fringe name heading towards the Olympic decision, but another year of good play would make him hard to deny.

Stock down. Feel like I have to mention this. It felt like the country was at Hockey War and he dodged the draft. Maybe we'll hear more about his condition and understand, but that he played games for Vegas leading up to the event made it feel like he didn't care to be there, which some are justified in taking personally. I would bet we hear this vehemently denied, as he's a decorated veteran player who likely prioritized pushing for another Stanley Cup. And maybe he didn't know what the event would become. But there's no doubt it hurts his stock, perception-wise.

Stock up. No mistakes, long, good skater, looked unafraid. Didn't do anything special but he wasn't asked to, either.

Stock unchanged. Bummer to lose him so early.

Stock up. Was steady and defended hard, made great passes from the defensive zone, and is the perfect complement to Makar, as we already knew. Threw one ice-length sauce to MacKinnon in the final that was pretty jaw-dropping.

Stock way, way up. A national audience finally got to see one of its brightest young defence stars in huge moments, and he didn't wilt. In fact, he seemed unfazed. A solid bet for Italy.

Stock up. Started slow in the first game, but really found his feet and became a breakout pass specialist for Canada by the final game. One of the team's more pleasant surprises.

GOALIES

Stock up. "Clutch" is a real thing, and while he may not be one of the NHL's best anymore, he's a guy who doesn't get overwhelmed by the big moments. And in this tournament, the team needed that.

Stock unchanged. Did not play, and not by choice.

HEAD COACH

Jon Cooper

Stock up. He showed conviction in sticking with Binnington, who got the job done. He showed a willingness to go away from a big name like Marner when it wasn't working, and that it isn't personal by bringing that same player back up when he was playing better. Cooper's cool demeanour works great in pressure moments.

What a spectacular week of hockey. A massive win for the players, the league, and the game of hockey. Oh, and for Canada! In the wake of some divisive years, it was nice to unite against a common foe, cheer, and come back together for a week. Here's to the true North, strong and free.

[Sportsnet.ca / Ranking the top 15 performances at the 4 Nations Face-Off](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva- February 22, 2025

It would've been difficult to script it any better, had the final game of the 4 Nations Face-Off played out only on the page rather than out on the ice.

Sudden-death overtime, the crowd on its feet, two of the best squads ever assembled for their countries going toe to toe, launching wave after wave at each other. And then, there, under the lights, amid the "U-S-A!" chants and a swirl of political tension that ramped up the weight of this thing more than anybody predicted, the puck arrives on Connor McDavid's stick, with acres of open ice around him. Cue the confetti.

Rewind to the beginning of this tournament, somehow only a little over a week ago, and I'm not sure anyone on either side of the glass thought this tournament would become what it did. It seemed a fun addition to the calendar, a chance to see some generational talents line up alongside each other, and a worthy appetizer to the true best-on-best competition next year. But it took just one game for that perspective to shift, for the players to prove how invested they were, for them to show this would be much more than an international-flavoured All-Star Game.

And a week-and-a-half later, as the tournament came to a close, fans were up on their feet, cheering at the top of their lungs — in Boston, sure, but in living rooms and pubs and anywhere else that had a screen, all over the country, too.

With the Canadians crowned champions courtesy of No. 97's overtime clincher, and the tournament now wrapped, let's take stock of the best performances we saw during the 4 Nations Face-Off.

1. Connor McDavid, Canada

At the most important moment of this tournament, in the most important game of this tournament, it was McDavid rising to the occasion that made all the difference for the champs. But even beyond the trophy-clincher, No. 97 was crucial for the Canadians all tournament long. In the first meeting between Canada and the U.S., it was he who came up with the red-and-white's only goal. In the must-win tilt against Finland, McDavid scored early to get Canada rolling, before setting up another later. Entering this tournament with the weight of expectations on his shoulders, in his first taste of national team action in nearly a decade, the Richmond Hill, Ont., product delivered for his country.

If not for the dramatic final act from the man above him on this list, it would've been a near-flawless tournament for Hellebuyck. The reigning Vezina Trophy winner entered the last game of the tourney having allowed just a pair of goals in two games. His presence was particularly pivotal during the first meeting between the two eventual finalists, Hellebuyck's dominance a key factor in the Americans getting the best of the match-up. Even after allowing three in the final, Hellebuyck finishes as far and away the best goalie of the tournament.

The sequence that will be remembered most from this 4 Nations Face-Off will be the very last one, with No. 97 playing the hero. But throughout Canada's run, it was MacKinnon's greatness that allowed his countrymen a chance at glory. The Nova Scotian phenom kicked things off with Canada's first goal less than a minute into the tournament, then came up with a pair (including the game winner) in the victory over Finland that pulled Canada into the championship game, before he got the red-and-white started again with the first goal in Thursday's finale. He finished with a tournament-leading four goals and a well-deserved MVP nod.

This tournament had a different look for the Canadian captain. After donning the national-team sweater with the weight of carrying a nation in tournaments past, No. 87 arrived this time needing only to lead, to guide the next generation of high-flying game-breakers in the biggest moments. And he did that, setting the tone with a statement performance in Canada's tournament opener — a three-point night that included a dazzling setup less than a minute into Canada's first game, and another to set up the overtime winner. But Crosby's finest moment of leadership came against Finland. As the Finns mounted a late comeback in the must-win affair, scoring a pair late to pull within one, the captain stepped up, levelled the Finns' best at centre ice, and wired home a long-range empty-netter that killed the comeback, iced the game, and sent Canada on to the final.

5. Matthew Tkachuk, United States

Injuries limited the elder Tkachuk brother from having an even greater impact on this tournament, and if there's one thing the Americans will carry into next year's Olympics, it'll surely be the thought of what they could do with a fully healthy lineup. Even so, Tkachuk was front and centre for the Americans, playing the same role he's played for his club team so many times, as his squad's heart-and-soul leader. He was crucial in setting the tone for his teammates early in the tournament, potting a pair of goals in the Americans' first game, and dropping the gloves off the opening faceoff in the first Canada-U.S. meeting. Ultimately, a lower-body injury derailed his tournament and limited him to just seven minutes of ice in the championship game, with Tkachuk unable to play the third period or overtime. Still, he was at the centre of much of the tournament's drama.

6. Brady Tkachuk, United States

It was full-on Bash Brothers mode for the Tkachuks in this tourney, and like Matthew, Brady made clear from Game 1 just how invested he was. The younger Tkachuk followed in his brother's footsteps through the early goings — each scoring a pair in the Americans' first game, each dropping the gloves in the first nine seconds of that wild Canada-U.S. tilt — but by the end of the tournament, after injuries sidelined some of the U.S.'s best, Brady kept coming forward, throwing his weight around and throwing pucks on net. The Scottsdale, Ariz., product finished tied for the second-most goals in the tournament with three, including the Americans' first in Thursday's final, and tied for the most shots over the course of the tourney, too.

7. Mikael Granlund, Finland

Among the two squads that fell short in this tournament, no one stepped up and had as seismic an impact as the Finns' Mikael Granlund. While he and his countrymen were dealt a difficult hand, entering as the clear underdog alongside three stacked rosters, the Finns did what they always do, showing resilience and finding a way to make noise. Each time they did, Granlund was at the centre of it. In the 6-1 early drubbing at the hands of the high-flying Americans, it was the 32-year-old who set up Finland's only tally. In the hard-fought rivalry match against Sweden, Granlund scored the overtime winner. And in a crucial game against Canada, with a ticket to the final on the line, the veteran singlehandedly authored a near-historic comeback, scoring twice in the final minute to pull his side within one, forcing Canada into a nervy finish. He finished tied for fourth in the tourney scoring race, with four points through three games.

8. Zach Werenski, United States

Coming into the tournament, there was no shortage of buzz around the Americans' star-studded blue line, around the seemingly inevitable offensive wizardry of Quinn Hughes and Adam Fox. Then there was the hard-nosed Charlie McAvoy, and the shutdown king, Jacob Slavin. Werenski all but flew under the radar amid that mix, but the smooth-skating rearguard wound up a crucial factor for the Americans.

Putting points on the board in all four of the Americans' games — a trio of assists in the tournament opener against Finland, another against Canada, a helper even in the meaningless meeting with Sweden, and one more in Thursday's final — Werenski finished the tournament as the 4 Nations Face-Off's leading scorer, with six points through four games.

9. Jacob Slavin, United States

For a team stocked with gifted, offensive high-flyers, up front and on the blue line too, Slavin's presence was essential for the Americans. He was more than just the counterbalance to the dynamism dotted elsewhere among the U.S. lineup — he was the best chance the team had at nullifying opposing squads who boasted that same thing. The veteran rearguard proved that most during the first meeting between Canada and the U.S., showcasing his shutdown prowess en route to a 3-1 U.S. win that left Canada's future Hall of Famers largely stymied and frustrated. He was no less crucial in Thursday's finale, Slavin's steady, stifling approach a key reason it took an overtime nail-biter for Canada to clinch the trophy.

10. Mitch Marner, Canada

If not for his performance in the biggest moment of the biggest game, there's little chance Marner's name would be considered among the tournament's best. Overall, it was something of a tumultuous run for the Markham, Ont., product, Marner starting with fireworks, then going quiet, then coming up clutch with the trophy on the line. Rewind to that must-win tilt against Finland, and No. 16 was among the least-used weapons on the red-and-white's bench, coach Jon Cooper granting Marner the second-fewest minutes of any Canadian forward. And yet, with it all wrapped up, he finishes as an undeniably crucial piece of this championship effort, coming up with three of his squad's most important sequences during the four-game run: the overtime winner in a tournament opener that started Canada off on the right foot against Sweden, a slick setup for Sam Bennett's pivotal tying goal in Thursday's championship game and, finally, the all-important setup for McDavid's overtime tally that clinched the whole thing.

11. Jordan Binnington, Canada

There might not have been a single player in the tournament scrutinized as heavily as Binnington. It started two months before the tournament began, when the Canadian roster was first unveiled, and it hit a fever pitch later, when Binnington was named the starter for his country's opening game. Given where he's at in his career, the doubt was warranted, and the 31-year-old certainly looked human plenty of times over the course of Canada's run. But the Team Canada brass made clear time and time again that it picked the Richmond Hill, Ont., product because of his chops as a big-game player — and in the final minutes of Thursday's overtime finale, Binnington cemented that reputation, coming up with a few incredible, game-saving, championship-hope-preserving saves to keep the tilt alive before McDavid ended it.

12. Jake Guentzel, United States

Flying under the radar amid the chatter about the Tkachuk brothers, the blue-line injury chaos and Hellebuyck's heroics, Guentzel continued his run as one of the game's most underrated offensive difference-makers, quietly chipping in with some key contributions that helped the Americans find their way to the final. After bagging a goal and an assist during the opening rout of the Finns, Guentzel's finest performance came in the Americans' statement win against Canada, the 30-year-old coming up with two goals in the 3-1 win. He finished as the Americans' most-used forward, and used those minutes to tie for the second-most goals and fourth-most points in the tourney.

13. Jack Eichel, United States

Eichel was somewhat overshadowed leading into this tournament, with much of the focus on Auston Matthews as the Americans' lead pivot. In the end, while No. 34 mostly turned in a quiet tournament, Eichel was immense for the U.S., coming up with quality reads all over the sheet every game, taking turns at authoring sterling offensive sequences and helping to shut down his opponents' best weapons. Although he was held off the board in the tournament finale, the 28-year-old was key in helping the Americans get there at all, putting up points in each of their previous three games and finishing tied for the second-most assists and fourth-most points in the tourney.

14. Sam Bennett, Canada

Take all those elements of the game outside the scoresheet, all the talk of heart-and-soul leaders, intangibles and X-factors, roll it all up together, and you get Sam Bennett. The Holland Landing, Ont., product raised some eyebrows when he first cracked the Canadian roster. He watched his countrymen's first game from the press box. But when Bennett drew in for the first throwdown with the Americans, something shifted. Two seconds into his 4 Nations debut, the Canadian wrecking ball was dropping the gloves with Brady Tkachuk, stepping up against the American bruiser, who had 32 pounds on him. From there, Bennett was a relentless presence for the red-and-white every time he touched the ice, finishing among Canada's shots leaders, landing the most impactful, momentum-altering hits of anyone in a red sweater and, most importantly, coming up with one of the most important goals of Canada's title-clinching run: the one that pulled his country level in the final, paving the way for the eventual overtime finish.

15. Erik Karlsson, Sweden

It was largely a disappointing showing for Sweden, whose only win came in a meaningless meeting with an American squad that had already booked its ticket to the final. Still, there were bright spots for the Swedes. Tops among them was the veteran Karlsson, who turned back the clock with some vintage offensive performances. He was far from flawless, winding up on the wrong end of some defensive sequences too. But for a group that found itself struggling to string together a convincing attack, Karlsson tapped into the best of his offensive tool-kit and did what he's long done best — whipping cross-ice passes to set teammates up to get on the board, finishing off end-to-end rushes with tallies of his own, and bringing out as much as he could from the group around him. The 34-year-old finished with the second-most points of any defenceman in the tournament, and tied for the most among the Swedes.

Honourable Mentions: Cale Makar, Charlie McAvoy, Patrik Laine, Jesper Bratt

[Sportsnet.ca / Friday Four: Expect Sam Bennett to cash in big after standout 4 Nations](#)

By Michael Amato- February 22, 2025

The Friday Four is a collection of thoughts and information on some intriguing player storylines from around the hockey world. On deck this week:

- Bennett is going to get paid
- Slavin puts on a defensive clinic
- Connor's omission a questionable move
- Did Karlsson raise his trade value?

Once Canada put Sam Bennett in the lineup, there was no taking him out.

Bennett didn't play in Canada's opening game against Sweden but was inserted for last Saturday's clash with the Americans, and he barely took a stride before dropping the gloves with Brady Tkachuk for a spirited tilt. From there, it was full steam ahead. Bennett combined for nine shots in the two games against the U.S. and tallied a critical game-tying goal Thursday night that set the stage for Connor McDavid to win it in overtime.

He played on the fourth line for Canada, but the trio of Bennett, Seth Jarvis and Brad Marchand had a handful of strong shifts in the first period, generating scoring chances and driving offence. That unit brought some much-needed energy to the group to start the game, and eventually, Bennett was rewarded with that pivotal goal. He ultimately finished the championship game against the U.S. with a team-leading six shots and five hits while also drawing a penalty. He had a hand in just about everything for Canada.

Bennett's play in this tournament also did nothing to hurt his value as a potential free agent this summer. The Florida Panthers forward is in the final year of a deal where he's making \$4.4 million and he'll be in line for a major raise. Bennett has more than proven he's a critical component that excels in big games, both at this 4 Nations Face-Off and the Stanley Cup playoffs. His style of play is built for the post-season and he was a huge difference-maker for the Panthers going to back-to-back finals and winning it all last year.

There could be a perfect storm for Bennett to cash in big this summer. First, he's on pace for 27 goals and a career-best 52 points. He's more than just a physical player and has the ability to chip in offensively as well. Top-six centres don't grow on trees and there is virtually no team in the league that couldn't benefit from Bennett's services.

The salary cap is also set to rise substantially. It's a great time to hit the market at the top of your game like Bennett is. Florida would undoubtedly like to keep him, but it's going to be a tight squeeze. Even with a rising cap, the Panthers are committed to several players for major term and money. Sergei Bobrovsky and Aleksander Barkov both make \$10 million, Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Reinhart sit just behind that, then Carter Verhaeghe's \$7 million AAV kicks in next season, too.

Then there's Aaron Ekblad's contract to consider as well. He'll also be a free agent in the summer and the Panthers may have to decide which player to keep between Ekblad and Bennett. Florida's defence is a lot thinner than its forward group and the loss of Ekblad could hurt more. Losing Bennett wouldn't be easy, but Anton Lundell is a good top-six-centre-in-waiting who could cushion the blow.

It's hard to forecast what Bennett might get if he hits the open market, but he'll be looking for a long-term deal as he turns 29 this summer. This is likely Bennett's last and best chance to cash in. Considering what top-six centres go for in July and where the cap is headed, I'd be very surprised if Bennett's next deal didn't start with a seven. Elias Lindholm got seven years with a \$7.75 million AAV from the Boston Bruins last year, so given Bennett recently adding a Stanley Cup and 4 Nations title to his resume, it would seem likely he could get something in that neighborhood.

For now, Bennett will simply enjoy this victory and let his play do the talking when it comes to his contract. Considering he was scratched in the opening game of this tournament and his place in the lineup, Bennett was probably one of the final debated roster selections for this team. He made it over players such as Mark Scheifele, Tom Wilson and Robert Thomas, which many didn't hesitate to question. Bennett ultimately proved he belonged and his versatility was vital to Canada's success.

Whether he stays with Florida or lands somewhere else long term, Bennett is proving to be invaluable. He's someone you win with.

Everyone should appreciate what Jaccob Slavin brings to the table after this tournament.

Defensive play isn't the most exciting part of the game to many, but Slavin is a master at his craft. He led all American skaters first time out against the Canadians with 25:36 of ice time and skated a ridiculous 28:32 in the final, which included 1:42 shorthanded during Canada's only power play.

Slavin saved multiple potential goals against Canada, frustrating elite players at every turn. Exhibit A was when the Carolina Hurricanes defender flashed a quick stick and beat Sidney Crosby to a loose puck when he had an open net.

Late in the second period, Slavin also put his recovery skills on full display, as he was beaten inside on a rush by Connor McDavid but managed to get his stick back in the way to alter McDavid's shot. He's not a bad shot-blocker either.

Slavin's contributions were of added importance when you consider Quinn Hughes couldn't play, and then the U.S. lost Charlie McAvoy partway through the tournament to an injury. Everybody picked up the slack but the Americans really leaned on Slavin for huge minutes against the opponent's best players at critical times.

If you're a Hurricanes fan, none of this is surprising. Slavin does this, day-in and day-out in Carolina, and if there was an award for the best defensive defenceman, he'd likely have won it multiple times throughout his career. After this 4 Nations Face-Off, though, it's safe to say the majority of the hockey world is going to come away with a much larger appreciation for Slavin.

They say hindsight is 20/20, but it was easy to question the U.S. electing to leave Kyle Connor out of the lineup for the 4 Nations championship game.

The States went with Chris Kreider instead and they probably could've used Connor's services in a number of ways on Thursday night. For one, only five players have more goals than Connor this season, and none of them are American. He has three more goals than the next-closest player from the U.S., and Connor is also tied with Jack Eichel at 69 points, where, again, no American has more. You'd think in a tight game that ended up 3-2 in overtime, Connor could've potentially been a valuable contributor.

There's also the matter of Matthew Tkachuk, who was clearly injured and played just 6:47 against Canada. He played his final shift with around seven minutes left in the second period. Tkachuk is obviously a heart-and-soul player for the Americans and had no intention of missing this game, but leaving a healthy, elite scorer in the press box in favour of Tkachuk may have been a misstep.

The U.S. also played Connor in the bottom six when he did get into games during the round robin and had just 8:32 in its last game against Canada, as the Americans never really found an effective fit for him in the lineup. Even though Team USA was brimming with talent, there was probably a better way to utilize one of the league's best goal scorers.

Erik Karlsson would like to remind you he's still got game.

The Swedish defender had an impressive 4 Nations tournament, despite being in the middle of a mediocre 2024-25 with the Pittsburgh Penguins. Karlsson ended up posting a point in each of Sweden's three games and totaled five shots, including this vintage rush where the 34-year-old buried the puck in the top corner.

Karlsson's play would be of particular interest to other teams around the National Hockey League. His name has been subject of trade rumours leading up to the deadline, but given his struggles this season and his contract, it was hard to imagine there would be any takers for Karlsson. Now, after an impressive showing in international play, some teams could potentially be more intrigued to make an offer.

What Karlsson has working against him is mainly his contract. The Penguins blueliner owns a \$10-million cap hit for two more years after this one, which is less than ideal for a declining player approaching his mid-30s. There would only be a handful of contending teams able to take on Karlsson's contract and probably even fewer willing parties. That's in part because Karlsson's skills and numbers are declining. He's a minus-14 and pacing for just 54 points this season, which would be his lowest total over a full 82-game campaign in nearly 15 years.

Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas also isn't going to give Karlsson away, so it's going to take a decent return that will likely include young players Pittsburgh can factor into its future plans. Not every contending team has a cupboard stocked full of prospects it is willing to part with.

That said, if you're looking at the glass half full where Karlsson is concerned, we've just seen what he can do when surrounded by better players. Outside of Sidney Crosby, there isn't a ton of talent in Pittsburgh right now and the franchise is clearly going in the wrong direction. Now, there's no team in the league that boasts the talent of a full Swedish squad, but there are definitely situations where Karlsson could flourish much better, depending on his landing spot.

The other important positive about Karlsson is he's suddenly becoming a pillar of health. After skating in several injury-filled seasons when he joined the San Jose Sharks, Karlsson has very quietly not missed a game in more than two and a half years.

If you wanted Karlsson and got the Pens to eat some of the money, he could be a tempting option for a team looking for help on the power play and a puck-moving defenceman. You'd have to pair him with a reliable defensive partner in order to get the most out of him, but there's no denying the offensive talent is still there. With the cap going up significantly over the next couple of years, Karlsson's contract may not be as scary to some teams as it once was, and you'd be getting him for three playoff runs.

It only takes one interested team to make a deal.

