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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets out 'grind' New York Islanders: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – November 1, 2024

Late in the first period Wednesday night at Nationwide Arena, Maxim Tysplakov hit the afterburner entering the Blue Jackets' zone.

The New York Islanders forward split two defenders, barreled toward the Columbus net and eyed up how to beat goalie Elvis Merzlikins for the game's first goal. Merzlikins, meanwhile, glued his full attention on Tysplakov before stonewalling him with a dazzling save in the Jackets' 2-0 shutout victory.

"I just try to delete all pressure that I have," Merzlikins said. "I just want to go play (and) be relaxed. If you do that well, then by the end of 60 minutes, the result is going to be a good one. That brings us wins, brings us points, brings us (higher) in the standings. It's just a snowball, right?"

That's one way to describe the impressive 5-3-1 start to the Blue Jackets' season. They've now got 11 points and wake up Thursday holding one of those "way too-early" wildcard positions in the Eastern Conference. Not bad for a team that analysts universally projected as one of the NHL's worst before the season.

Here are three takeaways from another eye-opening win:

Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins shares shutout of New York Islanders, still stinging about lost zero

Letting a shutout slip in the Blue Jackets' 6-1 rout of the Edmonton Oilers on Monday still smarts for Merzlikins, who slammed his stick in disgust after Mattias Ekholm spoiled that effort with 26.8 seconds left.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason used the goalie's emotional response as a teachable moment and had a talk with Merzlikins about individual priorities and team accomplishments — specifically how the latter was more important than the former. Merzlikins followed it up with another brilliant effort to shut out the Islanders, making note of two things afterward: blanking New York was a team accomplishment and, well, you know, it could've been a second straight shutout.

Some habits die hard. A postgame question referencing Ekholm's goal incorrectly began with a statement that it was scored with 28.6 seconds to play, which Merzlikins corrected while smirking.

"Twenty-six," he said.

All goalies enjoy putting up a zero, but none more than Merzlikins.

That may never change, but he did give full credit to his team for blocking 20 shots, clearing loose pucks from dangerous areas and giving him open lanes to see through. Merzlikins' shutout was the 11th of his NHL career, first of the season and first since blanking the St. Louis Blues, 1-0, on Jan. 30, 2024 at Enterprise Center.

"We just have to keep working as hard as we are working now." Merzlikins said. "It's obviously a nice feeling, as well, the shutout. It's definitely not just me. It's 'team.' They helped me a lot. They really worked hard for this, so this is our shutout ... could be two in a row."

Columbus Blue Jackets capitalize on scheduling quirk, post impressive Metropolitan Division victory

A lot is now being said about the number of opponents the Blue Jackets have faced as those teams concluded back-to-backs that began 24 hours earlier in different cities.

The Islanders were the sixth team the Jackets faced under those parameters in their first nine games, which is now being used by some to besmirch their solid start. While there is validity to the assertion that back-to-back games tend to weaken legs in the second game, especially after arriving late the night before in a new city, that shouldn't tarnish the Blue Jackets' record.

They still had to capitalize by winning games, which happened in four of those six games.

That should be seen as the mark of an improving team, rather than an explanation for why the Blue Jackets are better than projected. Columbus has also struggled against the Metropolitan Division the past three years, its own division, including the Islanders sweeping a three-game series last season.

"I know the schedule has been in our favor recently, but it's going to get us in the end," defenseman Damon Severson said. "(You) can't use it as an excuse, because we're going to be on the back half of back-to-backs, as well, for teams that are waiting for us. But division games are massive. We were able to do a good job and get the win."

Columbus Blue Jackets learn to win a different way

Until this game, the Blue Jackets had scored six goals in each of their previous four victories.

That wasn't going to hold for long, especially against a stout defensive team like the Islanders. The Jackets knew what to expect against New York, which is comprised of big, heavy, experienced veterans who make each game a slog. As Merzlikins matched Semyon Varlamov save for save in a goaltending duel, the quickly maturing Blue Jackets turned the Islanders' two biggest assets, patience and persistence, against them.

"The players were saying (in the locker room), 'It's a boring game, just stick with it, we're not opening anything up,'" Evason said. "We're not playing defensively, but we're playing stingy, the same as they were. We just wanted to go about our business, and the exciting part for our coaches is the players were saying that prior to us saying it. That's a real good sign."

It's the sign of a team maturing while still leaning heavily on "young" players up and down the lineup. Look no further for a reason to believe in this team's ability to surprise the NHL this season than what they pulled off Wednesday.

"You've got to find a way to win in different ways, whether it's a 1-0 game or a 6-4 game, 5-4 game, whatever it is," defenseman Ivan Provorov said. "You've got to adjust your game, as a team, but also play the right way."

[BlueJackets.com / Olivier's early-season scoring barrage is no accident](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – November 1, 2024

When Blue Jackets fans think of Mathieu Olivier, the first thing that might come to mind is him handling some of the toughest customers in the NHL the past few seasons.

It's how the broad-shouldered wing has made a name for himself around the league, but it's not all that Olivier brings to the table. He's proved it the first nine games of the Blue Jackets season, in which he's scored four goals to help the team to a 5-3-1 start.

While those numbers might catch some CBJ fans by surprise considering Olivier's career high is the five goals he's tallied each of the past two seasons, those in the locker room have long known about his ability to put the puck in the net.

"He's got a sneaky skill set," Zach Werenski said. "We see it in practice every day. I feel like fans don't really know that. He scores a lot in shooting drills. In 2-on-1s, he's always shooting the puck and scoring. We see it pretty frequently in practice. I'm not surprised by it, but the average fan might be a little bit. But he does it every day in this building and he works really hard at it, so I'm happy for him."

In other words, it's no coincidence that Olivier is off to a strong start on the score sheet, adding two assists for six points on the campaign. This summer, the 27-year-old got to work to improve his offensive game and also made a few equipment tweaks, all in an effort to round out his game.

Standing 6-1 with broad shoulders and plenty of muscle, he already knew he had the physical stature to handle the best in the game from that standpoint. After spending last summer continuing to rehab after suffering a broken tibia late in the 2022-23 season, he was also fully healthy this offseason when he returned home to train in Quebec City.

So this offseason afforded him the opportunity to add to his toolbox, and having scored 27 goals his final year of junior hockey in the QMJHL, he knows there's some ability to put the puck in the net in his repertoire. While many of his goals are of the greasy variety, including a tap-in at the side of the net during Monday's 6-1 win over Edmonton, he's also shown a shot that can beat goalies, such as the 86.5-mph wrister on a 2-on-1 that got by Toronto goalie Dennis Hildeby.

"I think I just spent a lot more time on the ice this summer compared to usual," Olivier said. "There's a few reasons why, but this summer it lined up pretty well, and I think I'm at a point in my career and my development that in the gym I got it pretty locked down. I don't have to necessarily go crazy and try to outwork myself summer in and summer out. Now I know my work ethic, so I can focus a little more on the ice time."

"That goes back to a while back when I was developing and I was working on my weaknesses, but now it's like, OK, weaknesses are strengths now, so I can build on the other stuff, which is where my head's at right now."

He also reported to Columbus with a clean slate, as all the Blue Jackets players had under head coach Dean Evason. While Olivier totaled 10 goals and 27 points in 120 games the past two seasons after being acquired by Columbus in a trade in the summer of 2002, he was more known to the previous staff as a guy who can drop the mitts, including 17 fights the past two campaigns against some of the toughest players in the NHL.

Evason did have a little familiarity, though, as Olivier signed in Milwaukee – the AHL affiliate of Nashville – to begin his pro career in 2018-19, the year after Evason left the Admirals’ staff to join the Minnesota Wild as an assistant coach.

Evason’s trusted lieutenant Scott Ford, now an assistant coach with the Blue Jackets, remained in Milwaukee and coached the Admirals during Olivier’s tenure there, so he did come to Columbus with a bit of a scouting report.

“All accounts were he wasn’t just that guy, a guy that goes out and fights and hits,” Evason said. “He’s got hands. He’s got speed to get in on the forecheck and be physical. I know I keep harping on it, but he earned the opportunity to play, kill penalties. He’s earned the opportunity to play more and in an elevated role, and he’s excelling at it.

“Is it a surprise? Not really. He’s just continually gotten better, and he’s been a real good player for us.”

For Olivier, the production is the reward, but he also wants to make sure it continues as long as possible.

“It’s fun to see the stuff that you think about and you want to work on get rewarded,” Olivier said. “The first thing that comes to mind is, ‘OK, it’s working, but how can we make this a consistent thing?’ I don’t want this to be a fluke or just like a good spot in the season. I want this to be a consistent thing whether the points are coming or not. Just the way we generate or the way we play, we have to make that a staple night in and night out.”

The line with Olivier, Justin Danforth and Zach Aston-Reese might be one of the fastest in the league. Olivier’s top speed of 22.73 mph this year per NHL Edge stats is in the 92nd percentile among league forwards, while Aston-Reese has also topped 22 mph and Danforth is just behind.

That trio has caused plenty of strife for opponents so far, in part because of Olivier’s contributions. And again, they’re no surprise to those who know him best.

“He works hard on his game every day,” Danforth said. “He’s one of those guys who is out there early working on his game. He scored a bunch in preseason. He’s scored a bunch this year, so I don’t see any reason why he’d slow down.”

The Hockey News / Elvis Merzlikins And The Columbus Blue Jackets Shut Out The New York Islanders, Earn Third Straight Win At Home

By Jason Newland – November 1, 2024

Damon Severson(2) and Justin Danforth(2) scored the goals for the Blue Jackets in the win against the New York Islanders.

But the story of this game was the play of Elvis Merzjikins. The Latvian goaltender stopped all 26 shots he faced, including a couple he made when he had no stick. Elvis hung tough all night and continued his stellar play as the Isles put 21 shots on goal in the final two periods.

Merzjikins has stopped 58 of the last 59 shots he's faced against Edmonton and New York. As he pointed out in his post-game scrum, he came 26.8 seconds away from back-to-back shutouts. There's no denying Elvis is hot right now and playing with some extreme confidence. Wednesday's shutout was the 11th of Elvis' career.

But, let's not take anything away from Semyon Varlamov, who was also exceptional in this game. Until Damon Severson scored on a deflected puck 5:43 into the third, he hadn't given up a goal to that point and looked unbreakable. Going into this game, Semyon Varlamov had a record of 7-0-2 in 9 games with a GAA of 1.73 and a save percentage of .952 vs. the Jackets on the road in his career. He is now 7-1-2.

The Jackets have now won three straight at home and three of the last four overall. They also have points in four straight games. With the win, they're now 5-3-1 and are 5th in the Metro.

The "Donkey of the Day" is Elvis Merzjikins.

The Hockey News / 13 Spooky Facts About The Columbus Blue Jackets On Halloween

By Jason Newland – November 1, 2024

Happy Halloween, Columbus Blue Jackets fans!

The CBJ have won three of their last four games, which include a 6-1 blowout win over the Edmonton Oilers, a shutout win over the New York Islanders, and a 6-2 thrashing of the Toronto Maple Leafs. The only loss came in OT to Nashville, a game in which they had two separate two-goal leads that they couldn't hold.

Their next game is Friday as they host the Winnipeg Jets. The Jets are hot at 9-1.

Since it's Halloween, let's look at 13 spooky facts about the Jackets through nine games:

1. They've scored 6 goals in a game four times already this season.
2. The Blue Jackets have scored first in 7 of the 9 games.
3. The Jackets are top-10 in scoring with 35 goals. They didn't hit 35 until game 14 in 2023-24.
4. They're 8th in goals against with 25.
5. Kirill Marchenko, the team's leading scorer with 11 points, didn't hit 11 until November 22nd during the 23-24 season.
6. The Jackets are scoring 3.89 goals per game this season. They were at 2.55 goals per game through 9 games last season.
7. The CBJ are only giving up 2.78 goals per game this season. Last season through 9 games, they were giving up 3.33.
8. Elvis Merzljikins has a save % of .925 this season through four starts.
9. Merzljikins is now fourth all-time in shutouts by a Blue Jacket with his shutout win over the New York Islanders last night. He needs one more to tie Marc Denis and two to pass him for third place.
10. Columbus has 5 wins through nine games. Last season they didn't get their 5th win until November 22nd.
11. David Jiříček has only played in two games this season and has one assist. He has been a healthy scratch for 7 of the nine games.
12. Through nine games the Jackets have 11 points. They didn't hit 11 points until November 11th last season.
13. The CBJ have lost 38 man games to injury in 24-25. Through nine games last year, they were at 22.

Make sure you get lots of candy tonight and stay safe!

What's Next - Columbus plays the Winnipeg Jets on Friday at Nationwide Arena.

The Hockey Writers / Is the Blue Jackets' Early Season Success Sustainable?

By Jonathon Robson – November 1, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have had a solid start to the season, going 5-3-1 through their first nine games. As of Oct. 31, they sit fifth in the Metropolitan Division standings in both points (11) and points percentage (.611). In spite of this, they actually are in a playoff spot due to the slow start of many teams in the Atlantic Division. In fact, they would currently be sitting third in the Atlantic, ahead of the Toronto Maple Leafs. While it is far too early to start predicting playoffs, it is a welcome change of pace for the Blue Jackets to not be sitting at the bottom of the standings at the end of October.

The Blue Jackets haven't made the playoffs since the shortened 2019-2020 season, where they went 33-22-15 and beat the Maple Leafs in the play-in round, just to lose to the Stanley Cup-winning Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round. Since then, the Blue Jackets' best season was the 2021-2022 season where they went 37-38-7. After a few rough seasons, this team and its fans are desperate for some success. So what about this season has been different so far? Is their early season success sustainable? Here are two reasons why the Blue Jackets have started hot, and a look at whether they can keep it up.

Franchise-Record Scoring

The Blue Jackets have continued to set records for most goals scored to start the season in franchise history. So far, they have scored 35 goals with a 3.89 goals-per-game average. That's four goals more than the previous record of 31, which has happened in three previous seasons. So is this team really that dominant offensively? Well, yes and no. They are currently sitting first in the NHL in shooting percentage at 14.21%. While certainly impressive so far, there are concerns about how sustainable this is. For instance, their 2-0 win against the New York Islanders had one goal from a lucky deflection off of a skate and the other was scored on an empty net.

Per MoneyPuck, the Blue Jackets are last in the league in expected goals for at 2.63. That means they are scoring goals at a significantly higher rate than expected. This could be attributed to the fortunate schedule the Blue Jackets have started with. Five of their nine games have been against teams playing their second night of a back-to-back. In four of those games, the team played their backup goalie. There is a high likelihood that the Blue Jackets' high shooting percentage could be related to facing quite a few secondary goaltenders. If that shooting percentage starts to dip, the Blue Jackets could quickly start to see their goal scoring dry up.

Blue Jackets' Improved Goaltending

An important improvement for the team this season has been the play of the Blue Jackets' netminders. Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov have both played well so far, with the former stopping 56 of 57 shots in the last two games. Merzlikins ranks 22 in NHL goaltenders this season in goals saved above expected (GSAX), posting a 0.8 GSAX in four games. Tarasov isn't far behind with a -0.2 GSAX that puts him at 33 out of 71 goaltenders this season. For comparison, Merzlikins finished 83rd out of 98 in GSAX last season, and Tarasov finished 52nd.

Is this improvement in net sustainable? This seems more likely than the scoring streak the Blue Jackets are on, although the reason might surprise you. The goalies' success may actually be, at least in part, due to the improved team defense being played in front of them. Merzlikins commented about the play in front of him after his shutout against the Islanders, saying "They helped a lot. They're really working hard for his. This is our shutout." The team defense has done a better job cleaning up rebounds and taking away open chances in front of the net which have been a real problem the last few seasons.

They have also had cleaner zone exits and limited defensive turnovers. All of this seems due to the new system and play style under head coach Dean Evason and will hopefully remain consistent through the season.

Flash in the Pan or New Normal?

While the scoring pace is almost certainly going to regress to a normal rate (Mathieu Olivier has four goals on 8 shots), the improvements in goals against should hopefully be more sustainable. The last three seasons have seen the Blue Jackets allow 297, 298, and a franchise record-setting 329 goals against. This season's improvements have the Blue Jackets on pace for 228 goals against, which would be a massive improvement. Even if their current scoring pace of 319 goals for this season slows down, this team absolutely could finish with more goals for than against. That hasn't happened since the 2018-19 season where they had 256 goals for and 231 goals against. Those numbers seem attainable this season, and if that happens, this Blue Jackets' team might just be knocking on the door of the playoffs.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Elvis Is Perfect, Severson Scores Game-Winner, Blue Jackets Find New Ways To Win

Will Chase – November 1, 2024

It's officially a streak.

Elvis Merzlikins stopped all 26 shots he faced and Damon Severson's third-period tally broke a scoreless tie as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the New York Islanders 2-0 on Wednesday night at Nationwide Arena.

Justin Danforth scored an empty-net goal as the Blue Jackets won consecutive games for the first time this season.

Merzlikins Is Perfect

Merzlikins was nearly perfect in Monday's 6-1 win over the Edmonton Oilers before a power-play goal by Mattias Ekholm snuck past him inside the final minute of the third period.

On Wednesday, he had his redemption.

Merzlikins made all 26 saves to earn his 11th career shutout. Over his past two starts, he has stopped 57 of 58 shots on goal and improved his stat line to 2-2-0, 2.05 goals against average, and a .925 save percentage. Per *MoneyPuck*, Merzlikins had 3.08 goals saved above expected.

"It's obviously a nice feeling, the shutout," Merzlikins said. "It's definitely not just me. It's team. They're helping me a lot. They're really working hard for this, so this is our shutout."

These wins are nice and it helps to get the goaltender into his groove.

"It definitely helps me," Merzlikins said. "I'm not there where I want to be yet but I just have to keep playing. No pressure, just get out there and have fun. Enjoy the game, enjoy the hockey, and just live day by day."

Severson Scores Game-Winner

Columbus finally solved Semyon Varlamov (24 saves) and broke through with the game's first goal by Severson at 5:43 of the third period. It's his second goal of the season. Sean Kuraly and Kevin Labanc picked up the assists.

The Jackets had a goal wiped off the board late in the first period because of goaltender interference. Danforth's empty-net goal at 17:57, assisted by Cole Sillinger and Ivan Provorov, sealed the deal.

Blue Jackets Find New Ways To Win

A couple of early-season trends broke in this game.

Columbus didn't register six goals in a victory, and they broke the alternating loss, win, loss, win, loss, win, loss, win pattern as the Jackets are on their first two-game win streak of the year.

It was a relatively clean game, with only one penalty, and the Islanders were the beneficiaries of the lone second-period power play.

"It's great to get two points obviously everytime you win within the division," Provorov said. "It's a big step for your team. Obviously, it was a grinding game out there. A lot of hitting. A lot of battling. But we found a way to win and that's a big improvement compared to last year."

Whether there are many or a few goals, winning games in various ways is an important step for the club.

"We gotta learn to win different ways," Provorov said. "Not looking too far ahead, but in tight games, important games, those are the type of games you have to play in the playoffs and we're learning how to do that and today was a great step forward."

The Blue Jackets played an opponent in the second half of a back-to-back for the sixth time this season and the Islanders were the fourth straight opponent in that situation. New York lost 3-1 to the Anaheim Ducks on Tuesday.

Flying High

The Blue Jackets conclude their homestand against the 9-1-0 Winnipeg Jets on Friday at 7:00 p.m. ET from Nationwide Arena.

1st Ohio Battery / Nine Stats Through Nine Games: The Columbus Blue Jackets Are Exceeding Expectations, And Here Are The Numbers To Back It Up

By Ed Francis – November 1, 2024

Before the puck even dropped on the NHL season, the Columbus Blue Jackets were an afterthought. They were projected to finish in the bottom five by every major hockey outlet, and in many cases, the bottom three.

MoneyPuck, a hockey analytics website, gave the team a microscopic 0.6% chance to make the playoffs. That means you would need to simulate this season 166 times to find just *one* time where the Blue Jackets would finish in the top half of the eastern conference.

Self-proclaimed analytics expert Dom Luszczyszyn of *The Athletic* gave them a projection of 68 points and a "0 percent" chance to make the postseason. Not less than one, not zero-point-a number.

Zero. Percent.

But the Blue Jackets are 5-3-1, and while early, are turning heads across the league.

The disrespect is still there: as of Thursday morning, the Blue Jackets are +15000 to win the eastern conference on *ESPNBet*, twice that of the Montreal Canadiens, who, at +7500, have the second-lowest odds in the conference. It hasn't budged since the start of the season. They still define the Blue Jackets as, to translate numbers into words: a non-factor among the non-factors.

MoneyPuck has somehow lowered the odds from the beginning of the season, as they indicate that Columbus now has a 0.3% chance to make the playoffs. *For your own safety, don't think about that one too long.*

Some credit to Luszczyszyn, who has since bumped his projection for the Blue Jackets to 77 points and a 3% chance playing beyond 82 games.

These statements are not to be confused with naivety. At the current pace, the Blue Jackets would go 46-27-9, a total of 101 points that would easily qualify them for the postseason. Even with the surprising start, a triple-digit season in the points department for this team would more likely be found at the intersection of Astonishing Avenue and Shock Street.

But this team is, through the first small chunk of the season, showing that they can compete — and defeat — any team in the league. They've completely bought into coach Dean Evason's system. The mix of veterans and young players are paying off exactly how Evason and President of Hockey Operations/General Manager Don Waddell intended and the young guys are quickly growing up before our eyes.

The entire team is being given opportunities and freedom that, in most cases, they haven't had in a Columbus sweater. Permission to play to their strengths, to make mistakes without fear of being benched (as long as they're the right kind of mistakes), being embraced by the staff and the organization around them to be the best version of themselves they can be. They're playing for each other — and they're passionate about it.

They're earning it, as the phrase has become around Nationwide Arena this season.

And the fruits of these labors as the calendar shifts from October to November? A franchise that feels rejuvenated, that finally feels like it may be ready to turn the page after what feels like a thousand licks of the fingertip.

Oh, and these nine stats — one for each game of a wild opening month:

12 Multi-Goal Periods:

Through 27 periods of regulation hockey, the Blue Jackets have scored in twenty of them. That's good, but this is better: they've scored two or more goals in 12 periods already. To do that last season, it took them 46 periods.

153-Game Streak Snapped:

When the Blue Jackets got two points Wednesday night, it gave them seven points in a four-game span for the first time since November, 2022. That's a span of 153 games. The three wins during the span were also the last time that Columbus won three straight games at Nationwide Arena.

35 Goals:

The 35 goals through nine games — an average of 3.89 per game — are the most in franchise history, and the margin isn't really that close. The previous record was 31 (or, 3.44 goals per game), set three times (2009-10, 2016-17, and 2018-19).

It's Not Just Scoring:

In the eastern conference, only the New York Rangers (+16), New Jersey Devils (+11), and Tampa Bay Lightning (+11) have a better goal differential than the +10 put up by Columbus so far. And of the five teams across the entire NHL who average more goals per game, only the Rangers and Winnipeg Jets have a lower goals against average than Columbus' 2.78.

The .611:

With a .611 points percentage in the month of October, the Blue Jackets just wrapped up their fourth-best opening month in club history. The three above it? 2007, 2017, and 2018. They made the playoffs in two of those three seasons.

Outshooting The Opposition:

It's a narrow margin, but the Blue Jackets are outshooting their opposition by a difference of 28.9 to 28.3 so far. They've been outshot by at least three shots per game in each of the last four seasons, so, in a word: progress.

Bested Only By McDavid & Draisaitl:

There are 60 forward lines who have played 50+ minutes together in 5-on-5 this season. The trio of Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan, and Kirill Marchenko rank second among them when it comes to expected goal percentage. In other words, how many expected goals would go in that team's favor. The Blue Jackets top line checks in at 72.9%, trailing only the Oilers top line of Zach Hyman, Leon Draisaitl, and Connor McDavid, who are at 74.0%.

14.21%:

In five-on-five play, the Blue Jackets are burying 14.21% of their shots. That ranks #1 in the NHL. Their also second in the league with a shooting percentage of 7.0% on all shot attempts, trailing on Vegas at 7.4%.

Five With Eight+:

Five Blue Jackets already have eight or more points this season: Marchenko (11), Monahan (9), Chinakhov (8), Zach Werenski (8), and Cole Sillinger (8). How does that stack up against the rest of the teams in the Metro? It's more than the New York Islanders (none), Carolina Hurricanes (2), Philadelphia Flyers (2), Washington Capitals (2), Pittsburgh Penguins (3), and equal to the New York Rangers. The only team with more are the New Jersey Devils, who have already played 13 games, four more than the Blue Jackets.

The Athletic / What we learned about the NHL in October: Goaltending highs and lows, Bruins' slow start

By Shayna Goldman – November 1, 2024

Goaltending can be the great equalizer in hockey. And sometimes, it can be what absolutely sinks a team.

It's early in the season, with most teams hovering around the 10-game mark. But some trends are emerging worth keeping an eye on.

Alexandar Georgiev has gotten off to a brutal start for the Colorado Avalanche, with over-aggressive mistakes that have proven costly. While Justus Annunen has been solid through four starts, he only has 24 games of NHL experience, which can be dicey for a contender to bet on.

The Avalanche generally don't need game-breaking goaltending to excel because they're stacked in front of the blue paint. But with mounting injuries and absences, they can't afford to let goaltending drag them down.

Goaltending isn't the only problem for the Pittsburgh Penguins right now, but it is one of the biggest early storylines. Tristian Jarry has been sent down to the AHL in the second year of a five-year, \$26.9 million contract. While he hasn't been an outright disaster to open the year, he hasn't been reliable. Alex Nedeljkovic isn't trusty enough in an expanded role, which has opened the door for Joel Blomqvist. As much as he has impressed, especially in a 46-save outing against Edmonton on Friday, the Penguins are in a less-than-ideal position in net.

It's too early to say if Georgiev or Jarry's starts will lead to some goalie movement, considering how rare mid-season trades are. Maybe one of them will find their footing like Stuart Skinner did last year in Edmonton. That's something the Oilers have to count on again after he has also stumbled out of the gate.

Connor Ingram hasn't found last year's magic yet, and key injuries on defense likely are only straining the Utah goalie. The New Jersey Devils, on the other hand, despite making big additions, still don't have reliable goaltending. Between Jacob Markström and Jake Allen, they only have a combined five quality starts through 12 games.

The Philadelphia Flyers have already looked for reinforcements from within because of Ivan Fedotov and Sam Ersson's struggles. Aleksei Kolosov was called up from Lehigh Valley and started last Saturday night.

The bad tends to be more eye-catching than the good, but there have been some bright spots in the early going as well.

Jake Oettinger has been fantastic in Dallas after a shaky season, by his standards, last year. Igor Shesterkin looks like he is worth every penny he might get in New York, picking up where he left off last spring. But one of the biggest standouts is a goalie without the support of a contender-level team in front of him.

Lukáš Dostál has been the difference in Anaheim this season, with quality starts in six of his seven appearances despite facing one of the toughest workloads in the league.

The question is how long he can withstand that workload and whether it will eventually weigh him down as the year rolls on. If Dostál proves he is ready to take over as the starter in that environment, maybe management could finally go through with a John Gibson trade. At this rate, there should be buyers.

Checking in on last year's surprise 50-plus goal scorers

Everyone predicted Sam Reinhart and Zach Hyman finishing second and third in goal-scoring last season, right?

Can either repeat?

With seven goals in 11 games, Reinhart's off to a strong start. But is a 52-goal pace realistic? After shooting a league-leading 24.5 percent last year, Reinhart still has a hot hand with a 23 percent rate to start. But that should regress closer to average at some point. That could slow down his pace if he doesn't pick up his scoring chance generation below the surface.

Reinhart's shots have added up to an expected goal value of 3.19; across an 82-game season, that shakes out to a 23.8 pace. That's a major drop from last year's 42. With Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk both back in the fold, Reinhart should add more substance behind his goal-scoring.

For Hyman, the 2023-24 season almost felt like an over-correction from 2022-23 when he struggled to convert on a lot of his forehand chances. He generated a ton of quality chances in all situations that added up to an individual expected goal total of 57 — and that's before accounting for the dangerous puck movement that often preceded those shots, thanks to Connor McDavid's playmaking.

Shooting 18.6 percent was out of character for Hyman, but even as that comes back down to Earth, the Oilers should be left with a productive goal scorer. He just has to start breaking through this season. He is still without a goal but after a sluggish first couple of games, Hyman looks a lot more like the scoring chance generator of last season; only Auston Matthews is ahead of Hyman's 6.8 expected goals heading into Wednesday night's matchups. The problem now is that he doesn't have the same playmaking to set up his shots as long as McDavid is sidelined.

While there were red flags for both Reinhart and Hyman last year, they're both on powerhouse teams surrounded by elite playmakers. These two should keep pushing the boundaries from years past; maybe their new normal is in that 40-goal range.

Broberg and Holloway are clicking in St. Louis

The Blues made waves with two offer sheets this summer. St. Louis didn't target the biggest restricted free agents on the market but went for mid-tier up-and-coming players on a team in a salary bind.

It was a calculated approach that seems to be paying off so far this season. Dylan Holloway's made a positive impact on both ends of the ice at five-on-five, while Philip Broberg's popping off on the scoresheet. Both players can grow with the Blues as the team tries to turn things around without a full-on tear-down.

Offer sheets have been few and far between over the last 10 years, and the fiascos between Carolina and Montreal with Sebastian Aho and Jesperi Kotkaniemi likely didn't help matters. But when used correctly, they can help a team gain a competitive advantage. The Blues don't need Holloway and Broberg to look like steals to inspire general managers to be bold — they just have to prove they're worth the price of acquisition (and the potential fallout an offer sheet can cause).

Are the Bruins frauds?

Boston came into the year with a 69 percent chance of reaching the playoffs. That's dropped down to 48 percent after a 4-5-1 start.

Middling five-on-five results contribute to that downtick. The Bruins have underwhelmed defensively and been lackluster offensively, both in terms of shot volume and quality. It all adds up to a 45.6 percent

expected goal rate that ranked 25th in the league ahead of Wednesday's matchups. Special teams play hasn't done the team any favors, either.

A lot of it falls on players tapped to be difference-makers. Charlie McAvoy and Hampus Lindholm haven't been reliable enough defensively; neither has offseason add Nikita Zadorov. Elias Lindholm hasn't been effective enough on either end of the ice and doesn't look in sync with David Pastrňák. And Brad Marchand's gotten off to a slow start.

A team can't miss out on the playoffs in October, but they can dig themselves an early hole that can bite them when it matters most. The Bruins don't look playoff-caliber right now so the pressure is on to change that. Their path isn't getting any easier, especially with teams like the Capitals making early noise in the East.

Chytil's a spark on the Rangers' third-line

With Filip Chytil, there tends to be a qualifier — if he is healthy. Injuries condensed his 2023-24 to just ten regular-season games and six playoff appearances. While the Rangers had a capable 3C in Alex Wennberg in his absence last year, that version of the third line just didn't convert on their puck possession often enough.

That has been a stark difference with Chytil back. The center adds more pop to the Rangers' middle six between his ability to generate scoring chances in transition and his puck-moving skill. With Will Cuyllé and Kaapo Kakko on his wings, the Rangers have earned about 65 percent of expected goals and are outscoring opponents 9-0. That line has been rewarded for their efforts with more ice time than Mika Zibanejad's in the last four games.

If Chytil can stay healthy, the Rangers' depth could become a real advantage.

The Golden Knights' high-octane scoring

Heading into the year, there were some legitimate questions about Vegas' forward group. All the upgrades at center and on defense have come at the cost of their winger depth, and uncertainty around Mark Stone only compounded those potential issues.

Scoring a league-high 47 goals through 10 games is one way to quiet some of those concerns. With a top-five power play and the most potent five-on-five scoring, the Golden Knights have gotten off to one of the hottest starts in the league.

Vegas is converting on a league-high 14.6 percent of its chances at five-on-five, which has helped them score almost 14 goals above expectation. That's fueled a rise up the standings in October but isn't a recipe for long-term success.

The Golden Knights should be able to pad their numbers more against upcoming opponents with issues in net, like Utah and Edmonton. But if Vegas wants to stay at the top long-term, they'll need more oomph behind their finishing. Their expected goal generation has trended up over their last couple of games; now they have to sustain it.

Karlsson's disastrous start

Goaltending is a problem in Pittsburgh, but it's not all that's holding them back. The Penguins are one of the worst defensive teams in the league at five-on-five.

Erik Karlsson has never been an elite shutdown defenseman; his strengths have always come from his ability to drive play from the back end. But this year, the Penguins are giving up so much in his minutes that it's dragging everything down. The highs, like his performance against Detroit and Montreal, stand

out. But the lows, like his play against New York, Buffalo and most recently Vancouver, have been an outright disaster.

In 17:16 of five-on-five action against the Canucks, the Penguins created little and gave up a ton with Karlsson on the ice. Vancouver dominated those minutes with a 78 percent expected goal rate. Mistakes and misplays cost the Penguins, who were outscored 3-1 with one of their top defensemen on the ice.

These defensive breakdowns have become the norm in Pittsburgh this season no matter who he is paired with, whether it's his mainstay partner from last year, Marcus Pettersson, or Matt Grzelyck. While there are a lot of defensive issues outside of Karlsson's minutes, his are noteworthy because he tends to share the ice with the Penguins' best forwards. The Penguins' top six can't play to their strengths because they're spending so much time in their own zone.

Hagel and Cirelli are shutting down top competition

With the Jake Guentzel signing, the Lightning have loaded up their top line. As a result, Brandon Hagel's shifted into a mainstay second-line role with Anthony Cirelli to open the year, and the two are thriving together.

The Lightning have rocked a 66.4 percent expected goal rate with Hagel and Cirelli on the ice at five-on-five and outscored opponents 7-3. It's an encouraging start for a team that needs more complementary scoring below their top line. It's even more impressive considering their hefty workload. Cirelli and Hagel are matched up against their opponents' top offensive threats, and they're containing them and driving play through the first month of the season.

Rotating right wingers hasn't slowed this combination down, either. Nick Paul excelled there to open the season, but shifting him to the third line has allowed for more lineup balance. Connor Geekie has been a fit with Cirelli and Hagel to round out Tampa Bay's top six.

Stars of the month

Kirill Kaprizov

The Wild's superstar has come into the season hot, which is exactly what this team needs to balance out their defensive style. Minnesota stumbled through the early goings of last year, and a big reason was that Kaprizov didn't quite look like Kaprizov. With seven multipoint games to start the season, he is bringing the electrifying style this roster desperately needs.

Sean Monahan

The Blue Jackets' top line of Yegor Chinakhov, Kirill Marchenko and Monahan is thriving to start the season. With five goals and nine points in eight games, the center is scoring at a career-high rate. And Columbus is dominating in his five-on-five minutes with 65 percent of the expected goal share and a 10-5 edge in scoring.

Lukáš Dostál

The third star is always the hardest. Quinn Hughes is shining in Vancouver, while Marchenko is crushing it in Columbus. Stone keeps lighting up the scoresheet, Reinhart has helped power the Panthers while shorthanded and Oettinger has been excellent in Dallas.

But this month, the honors have to go to Dostál, who leads the league with 11.9 goals saved above expected. The Ducks have gone 4-2-1 in his seven starts, winning nine of a potential 14 points — and much of that is thanks to their goaltender, who continues to put up quality start after quality start despite his team bleeding scoring chances.

The Athletic / As PWHL prepares to grow, which cities are top candidates for expansion teams?

By Hailey Salvian – November 1, 2024

The Professional Women's Hockey League is officially preparing for expansion.

The league — with six franchises in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Minnesota, Boston and New York — will add up to two teams as early as the 2025-26 season.

Which cities might be the top candidates?

League officials have not shared where they plan to send their request for proposals — which marks the first step in expansion — only that the league is looking for the right market size, fan base, facilities and economic opportunity.

“It's about finding the best market, the best fan base and the best partners,” Jayna Hefford, the PWHL's senior vice president of hockey operations told The Athletic after Tuesday's announcement.

It's still very early in the process, but here are our top eight potential PWHL expansion teams.

Pittsburgh

It's fair to imagine Pittsburgh will be among the top contenders for expansion. The Penguins — backed by Fenway Sports Group, which owns the Penguins, the Boston Red Sox and Liverpool F.C. — have been staunch in their support for women's hockey and desire for an expansion franchise.

The Penguins hosted a PWHL game at PPG Paints Arena last season with almost 9,000 fans in attendance — the ninth-most attended game in the regular season. A women's team could play its home games at PPG or at an expanded Lemieux Sports Complex in Cranberry Township, which is around 22 miles north of the team's downtown arena.

The facility serves as the Penguins' practice facility with two NHL-sized sheets of ice and land on which to build. Penguins president of business operations Kevin Acklin has suggested that a new third sheet of ice, with seating in line with modern arenas for NCAA Division I programs, could serve as a base of operations for a PWHL team. That would include offices for management and coaches, locker rooms, training and medical areas — essentially anything and everything a professional team would require, want and “deserve,” Acklin told The Athletic in January.

Games could also easily be broadcast on SportsNet Pittsburgh — a regional sports network FSG acquired in 2023 — which already carried some PWHL games last season, even without a team based in Pittsburgh.

Detroit

The city affectionately known as “Hockeytown” would be a natural choice for an expansion franchise. Hefford basically said as much at the neutral site game hosted at Little Caesars Arena last season, which set a U.S. record for attendance at a women's professional hockey game (13,736).

“It just seems like an obvious (spot) for a hockey market that we'd love to be a part of,” she said. “And although not in our Original Six, it's somewhere that we still, I think, have our eyes on. And tonight has just been another proof point that this is a market that loves hockey and I think loves women's hockey.”

Given the attendance at the game last season and the fight for a Division I women's team at the University of Michigan, there is an appetite for women's hockey in the state and a strong grassroots

system, with programs like Little Caesars and HoneyBaked Hockey Club. According to USA Hockey, Michigan ranked fourth in female hockey registration last season only behind Minnesota, Massachusetts and New York – three states that already have PWHL franchises.

The biggest issue with Detroit is the venue. The Red Wings and the NBA's Detroit Pistons are full-time occupants at LCA, which also hosts plenty of concerts and other events. USA Hockey Arena in Plymouth, Mich., less than 30 miles outside of Detroit, is a potential alternative, but with a 3,500 capacity it would be on the small side.

Washington, D.C.

Before the PWHL officially selected its original six markets, D.C., often came up as a potential landing spot, and it made a lot of sense. The Washington Capitals hosted two successful Professional Women's Hockey Players' Association events that served as the barnstorming precursor to the PWHL. Back in April, Monumental Sports & Entertainment majority owner Ted Leonsis told CNBC he wants to make D.C. "the capital of women's professional sports."

Like Pittsburgh, a Monumental-backed PWHL team would have broadcast infrastructure via the Monumental Sports Network. But, like Detroit, it could struggle to find an appropriate – or available – arena. Capital One Arena hosts the Capitals, the NBA's Washington Wizards and the Georgetown men's basketball team. The Capitals practice facility, where the PWHPA events were held, only has seating for around 1,200. Entertainment & Sports Arena – home of the WNBA's Washington Mystics, which is also owned by Monumental – would be an upgrade in size with around 4,100 seats, but it's unclear if the facility has the capacity to accommodate a hockey rink.

Chicago

If the PWHL wants to lead its first wave of expansion with a major American sports city, Chicago will be tough to beat.

It's a strong grassroots hockey market, with several youth programs and a number of notable home-grown national team players including Hockey Hall of Fame inductee Cammi Granato, Kendall Coyne Schofield, and Abbey Murphy – who could graduate from college and be the team's first-ever draft pick. You have to admit, that would be very cool.

Not to sound like a broken record, but the venue will be the biggest hurdle when it comes to a city like Chicago.

The United Center is likely too big and too busy. Wintrust Arena, where the WNBA's Chicago Sky play, is interesting with around 10,000 seats. But it's largely a basketball venue. Could it facilitate a sheet of ice? That remains to be seen.

Allstate Arena, home to the AHL's Chicago Wolves, seems like an easy alternative. It's around 20 miles from the downtown core in Rosemont, Ill., where Chicago's O'Hare Airport is located. It's a big venue (18,500), but shouldn't be as hard to get in as the United Center.

It's also worth noting the Minnesota Frost are the only team in the American Midwest; a Chicago expansion could fix that.

St. Louis

Speaking of Midwestern cities, St. Louis checks a lot of the boxes. It's a dedicated hockey market – the Blues' attendance figures have hovered around 18,000 for over a decade now – with strong girls youth hockey participation.

The Blues have invested in growing girls and women's hockey in St. Louis, with learn-to-play programs and previously hosting PWHPA events. CEO Chris Zimmerman has also been open about the team's desire to host a PWHL game in the city.

Figuring out facilities in St. Louis seems less complicated than some other destinations. The Blues are the primary tenant at the Enterprise Center and have a new \$83 million practice rink just outside of the city, the Centene Community Ice Center. The facility is home to the NCAA DI Lindenwood hockey teams and has capacity for over 4,500 people – a fine size for a new franchise.

Halifax

While the first five cities on this list have been in NHL markets, a potential NHL partnership is not a prerequisite. Neither is being in the United States, although there certainly seem to be more major U.S. markets than what might be possible in Canada. That being said, Halifax is an interesting prospect, especially if the league wants to consider markets outside of Ontario or the greater Toronto area.

Nova Scotia is a smaller province than Alberta, Manitoba or British Columbia but it is geographically closer to where the league currently operates, which is largely in Northeastern U.S. cities and Eastern Canada.

The Scotiabank Centre – home of the CHL's Halifax Mooseheads – has a capacity of around 11,000 and will host Game 6 of the Canada-USA Rivalry Series in February. The arena also hosts pro lacrosse. Truthfully, it would be surprising if Halifax was the seventh PWHL franchise, but the Rivalry Series game could prove to be an critical audition for pro women's hockey in the Maritimes.

Quebec City

On Wednesday, the PWHL officially announced Quebec City will host a neutral-site game between Montreal and Ottawa this season. City councillor Jackie Smith has already called the game the first step to landing an expansion franchise in Quebec City, according to the Associated Press.

Quebec City has an NHL-caliber rink – the 18,000-seat Vidéotron Centre where the neutral-site game will be played – that could host a full-time PWHL team with little to no scheduling issues.

Not to mention, the city is a hockey hotbed that hasn't had a major professional hockey team since the Nordiques left in 1995. The Los Angeles Kings and Boston Bruins played in front of a packed building during this year's NHL preseason. The Quebec Remparts, the city's QMJHL team, are typically among the leaders in attendance across the CHL.

It's easy to imagine the city embracing a PWHL team.

Western expansion

League officials have said they are not putting any guardrails on potential expansion franchises – meaning they aren't shutting down expanding far outside its current footprint.

Calgary has had successful women's professional sports franchises in the past – the CWHL's Calgary Inferno won the last-ever Clarkson Cup in 2019. The Seattle Kraken hold the record for attendance at a U.S. women's national team game on American soil (14,551). The Vancouver Canucks are a billion-dollar-franchise and British Columbia has become a hotbed for elite young talent, including Canadian phenom Chloe Primerano. There's California to consider, too, where many of PWHL owner Mark Walter's franchises – the Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Sparks – are currently based.

There are places in Western Canada and the Pacific Northwest that could and eventually should be home to P NHL franchises. However, adding a team on the other side of North America would come at a significant cost at a really early – and still growing – stage of the business.

Of course, it's all going to depend on what is proposed. If, say, the Seattle Kraken are offering the kind of support and infrastructure we saw during the Rivalry Series, maybe the league won't be able to say no.

The Athletic / How a hockey goalie mask designer helped make Hannibal Lecter an all-time villain — and Halloween costume

By Peter Baugh – November 1, 2024

Ed Cubberly had never heard of Anthony Hopkins when he received a phone call from Kathleen Gerlach, the assistant costume designer on a movie he knew nothing about. It was 1989, and the film version of “The Silence of the Lambs” was two years from becoming a critical and commercial sensation.

Cubberly, a full-time nurse at the time, living in Bayonne, New Jersey, had a side business making masks for NHL goalies from 1988 to 2000. Mike Richter, Frank Pietrangelo and Mark Fitzpatrick were among the players who wore his products.

So how did he get drawn in to help create one of film’s all-time villains?

At one point in the late 1980s, Cubberly left a business card at Gerry Cosby & Co. Sporting Goods in Manhattan. Not long after, members of the “The Silence of the Lambs” prop department went to the shop looking for a mask. They walked away with Cubberly’s contact information.

Gerlach reached out to Cubberly about making a mask — not for hockey but for what would become a classic scene in the movie. And thus began Cubberly’s lone foray into film and his connection to Anthony Hopkins’ portrayal of Hannibal Lecter, whom the American Film Institute ranks as the No. 1 movie villain of all time.

“My 15 minutes of fame,” Cubberly says now. “I guess it turned out OK.”

Midway through “Silence of the Lambs,” Lecter speaks to a senator while strapped to a gurney. He is a serial killer notorious for eating his victims, but he’s also a brilliant psychiatrist with information that could help catch another serial killer, Buffalo Bill. As he speaks to the senator, whose daughter has been kidnapped by Buffalo Bill, he wears a straight jacket and a fiberglass mask that covers his nose and the lower half of his face.

There’s an opening over his mouth covered by three metal bars — a measure against a potential cannibalistic outburst.

That was Cubberly’s finished product: the most famous mask he ever made, with all due respect to the Statue of Liberty mask that New York Rangers goalie Mike Richter wore in the 1994 Stanley Cup Final.

“It was kind of devious and scary looking,” says Cubberly, now 67. “It fit the scene perfectly.”

When enlisting Cubberly’s help, Gerlach gave him a description of the scene. Cubberly came up with the concept in only a few minutes, using a Sharpie to draw the design on a picture of one of his old masks. He interpreted Gerlach’s instructions as instructions to give Lecter a muzzle, which led to the mouth covering. He also added a pair of holes over the nostrils.

Cubberly was in contact with Gerlach and future Academy Award-winning costume designer Colleen Atwood throughout the process. At one point, they asked what he was thinking for the mask’s color. Cubberly suggested keeping the fiberglass’s greenish-tan shade. It would look like something that could have been made in jail, he told them. Director Jonathan Demme loved the idea, Cubberly recalls.

“I was just trying to get out of painting the thing,” he says with a chuckle.

Cubberly never met Hopkins, who won an Oscar for his performance. The film's prop crew mailed him a plaster mold of the actor's face, which he still has. Cubberly sculpted clay over the mold, then built the fiberglass mask over the clay. The process took only a couple of days.

The costume department had Hopkins try out different types of masks before filming. One looked like a beekeeper's mask. Others were more cage-like. Cubberly's design proved most effective.

"It looked nothing like any of the other masks," he says.

The scene is similarly unique — and tense. Dramatic string music plays as Lecter is wheeled forward, and Hopkins makes piercing eye contact with the senator as he toys with her throughout the conversation.

Cubberly doesn't watch many movies, but he and his wife went to "The Silence of the Lambs" when it came out in theaters. He didn't know exactly when his mask would make an appearance. The second it did, he jumped from his seat and let out a cheer.

The other patrons hissed at him to sit down.

"I made that mask for the movie!" he told them.

No one in the theater believed him. Why would they think the mask came from New Jersey?

Cubberly, who now lives in Frenchtown, New Jersey, received \$400 in payment for the mask. He also maintains copyright over the design. That's gotten him some extra cash over the years. He's signed contracts with Halloween costume companies allowing them to reproduce the mask.

Billy Crystal wore the original while hosting the Oscars in 1992, making a joke that he looked like the goalie from the Screen Actors Guild hockey team.

Cubberly hasn't seen the original in person since he shipped it from New Jersey to Pittsburgh, where most of the movie was filmed.

"It's a question I get all the time," he says. "I have no idea where it is."

He does, however, have a gift from the man who wore it. After making the mask, he asked the film's prop crew if he could get something signed by Hopkins. They granted the request, mailing him a photo of Hopkins wearing the mask. He keeps the photo framed on his wall.

"To Eddie," Hopkins scrawled at the bottom of the picture, "All good wishes — and be very careful on dark nights, Eddie, because I'll be waiting and watching."

Hopkins signed the picture twice: once with his own name and once with the name of the character Cubberly helped give his iconic look: Dr. Lecter.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: One scary thought for all 32 teams](#)

By Ryan Dixon – November 1, 2024

Halloween is all about visceral responses.

That could mean being freaked out by a slasher flick, jump-scared by a haunted house or coming out of your skin at the excitement of pulling off a perfect costume idea.

Big, bloody feelings.

When it comes to NHL teams, fright is felt from different perspectives. There are the scary thoughts a club has about itself — “This first-rounder can’t play; our goalie just isn’t good enough” — and there’s the fear others experience when they see a player or squad as an unkillable zombie force coming to devour their own Stanley Cup hopes and dreams.

As such, with this week’s power rankings landing on the day of nightmares, we’re presenting one scary thought related to all 32 NHL clubs.

- 1. Winnipeg Jets (9-1-0)** What if this power play never slows down? The Jets have converted nearly half their chances this season (44.8 per cent), making them a deadly force with the man advantage.
- 2. Dallas Stars (7-2-0)** Not much is scarier for other teams than looking at how good Dallas is, and thinking about how the Stars just keep drafting and developing players like Wyatt Johnston, Logan Stankoven and Mavrik Bourque.
- 3. Florida Panthers (7-3-1)** Why would this team stop being really, really good? Aleksander Barkov is still 29 years old; Matthew Tkachuk is 27; everybody happily takes less to stay there and new guys are going to want to come. Paul Maurice is a dream fit behind the bench for the Cats and — from Gus Forsling to Carter Verhaeghe to Sam Bennett to Sam Reinhart — Florida’s knack for being the place players find the best version of themselves is truly scary.
- 4. New York Rangers (6-2-1)** Nov. 1 is exactly eight months until Igor Shesterkin could potentially sign with a new club as a UFA on July 1, 2025.
- 5. Carolina Hurricanes (6-2-0)** The offensive spark Carolina has been in search of for years was in its midst all along. Martin Necas — whose name more than made the rounds in summer rumour mills — is taking his game to another level this season, with three goals and five assists for eight points in his past four games.
- 6. Minnesota Wild (6-1-2)** The Minnesota Wild have basically never had a No. 1 centre in their almost-25-year history. If Marco Rossi is that guy, watch out, Western Conference.
- 7. Tampa Bay Lightning (7-3-0)** Is Anthony Cirelli making a mid-career offensive leap? The 27-year-old has been a big contributor this season, notching 12 points in 10 games (albeit with just two goals). Throw in nine points from 3C Nick Paul, and suddenly Tampa’s lineup gets a lot longer down the middle after Brayden Point.
- 8. Vegas Golden Knights (7-3-1)** The idea of playing the Knights in Vegas is terrifying right now. The team is 7-0-0 on home ice with 39 goals for — 5.6 per game — and 16 against (2.3).
- 9. Washington Capitals (6-2-0)** A scary thought for the Atlantic clubs — Buffalo, Detroit, Ottawa — that always talk about leaping up into a playoff spot; what if Washington — which grabbed the final spot last season from the Metro — is actually good and won’t be going anywhere?

- 10. New Jersey Devils (7-4-2)** If Nico Hischier — one of the game's best defensive centres — is turning into an elite sniper, the rest of the league should be losing sleep. The 25-year-old leads the NHL with 10 goals.
- 11. Toronto Maple Leafs (5-4-1)** There's a better-than-zero chance the Leafs lose in the first round of the playoffs and Mitch Marner walks for nothing in the summer at age 28.
- 12. Vancouver Canucks (4-2-3)** Elias Pettersson has 31 points in his past 49 games, including playoff games. The idea of him as a 50-point player must haunt the dreams of the most paranoid Canucks backers.
- 13. Los Angeles Kings (6-3-2)** What happens when Anze Kopitar can't do it anymore? The 37-year-old is still the Kings' best forward and such a valuable two-way centre. The other guys playing centre for L.A. — Phillip Danault, Alex Turcotte, Trevor Lewis, Quinton Byfield — have combined for two goals this season.
- 14. Columbus Blue Jackets (5-3-1)** Could the Jackets really be a wagon? They're scoring 3.89 goals per game (sixth in the NHL) and, after blanking the Islanders Wednesday night, are surrendering just 2.78 (seventh).
- 15. Boston Bruins (4-5-1)** What if this high-floor team just never adds the raw talent required to take another real run at a title? Worse yet, what if the assumed floor — always at least making the playoffs — could be a trap door?
- 16. Colorado Avalanche (5-6-0)** All the offensive talent in the world can't save you when your team save percentage is a league-worst .837.
- 17. Edmonton Oilers (4-5-1)** The Oilers are living their nightmare — playing games without Connor McDavid — right now, even if it's only for a couple weeks.
- 18. Ottawa Senators (5-4-1)** What Ottawa did at the 2020 draft — grabbing Tim Stutzle and Jake Sanderson in the first five picks — might haunt the NHL for years to come.
- 19. Buffalo Sabres (4-5-1)** What if Dylan Cozens, who has but three assists this year, just can't rediscover his 31-goal form from two years ago? It would leave a huge hole down the middle in the Buffalo blueprint.
- 20. Seattle Kraken (5-4-1)** What if Matty Beniers can't fulfill that 1C promise we saw in his rookie year? Yeah, he's young, but we're talking worst nightmares here.
- 21. Anaheim Ducks (4-4-1)** Lukas Dostal is definitely starting to live inside the heads of NHL shooters with his league-best .943 save percentage.
- 22. Utah Hockey Club (5-4-2)** UHC is going through one of the scariest things any team can, having lost top-four defencemen John Marino and Sean Durzi for a huge chunk of the season.
- 23. Nashville Predators (3-5-1)** The idea of Steven Stamkos being washed as an NHL sniper is about as dark as it gets in Nashville. No. 91 is still stuck on one goal this season.
- 24. St. Louis Blues (5-5-0)** The darkest fears of GMs everywhere will come to life if the Blues have started a trend by successfully offer-sheeting two RFAs last summer.
- 25. Calgary Flames (5-4-1)** The nightmare may just be starting. Calgary has been outscored 10-1 in its past two games and doesn't have a 60-minute win in two weeks.
- 26. New York Islanders (3-5-2)** Who's afraid of a toothless vampire? Nobody, just like nobody worries about the Islanders' punchless offence, which has already been shut out four times this season.

- 27.** Montreal Canadiens (4-5-1) What if a five-year plan is actually an eight-year plan?
- 28.** Detroit Red Wings (4-5-1) What if the rebuild has already crested?
- 29.** Chicago Blackhawks (3-6-1) No shade, but Ryan Donato remaining the Hawks' second-best forward is a chilling thought for a club trying to take a step.
- 30.** Philadelphia Flyers (3-6-1) Pair Matvei Michkov with a first-overall pick next June and the league should fear the Flyers.
- 31.** Pittsburgh Penguins (3-7-1) The darkness is just setting in and the tunnel that shows the light out doesn't have a single brick laid yet.
- 32.** San Jose Sharks (2-7-2) Macklin Celebrini with Will Smith and a high 2025 pick up front; 2024 first-rounder Sam Dickinson anchoring the blue; Yaroslav Askarov in goal and free agents wanting to live in the Bay Area? Fear the Fin ... in about three years.

Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets GM Goes All Out for Halloween

By Nick Horwat – November 1, 2024

The typical NHL general manager is all business all the time, but that doesn't seem to be the case for the newest boss of the Columbus Blue Jackets. To celebrate Halloween, Blue Jackets president and general manager Don Waddell made sure to bring the lighthearted energy.

In a video posted to the Blue Jackets' social media, Waddell came riding into work in a full Green Lantern costume and riding a scooter. Complete with fake abs and a mask, Waddell is on patrol at the Blue Jackets' office.

The video was sent out with a caption mirroring a famous quote from the Green Lantern franchise.

“In brightest day, in blackest night, no prospects, free agents or opponents shall escape his sight!”

A good play on “In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight.”

The 2024-25 season is Waddell's first with the Blue Jackets organization after six years as president and general manager of the Carolina Hurricanes. It's been an emotional start to the Blue Jackets' season, but they've found relative success to start the year.

In nine games played, the Blue Jackets hold a 5-3-1 record for 11 standings points and are fifth in the Metropolitan Division. The expectations weren't high for Columbus, but they've done a fantastic job of performing through tragedy.

As the season treks on, a regression is expected from the Blue Jackets and Waddell, whether as the Green Lantern or himself, is prepared to react accordingly. The Blue Jackets might be a team to watch as the trade deadline approaches.

Until that expected decline arrives, however, the Blue Jackets and Waddell are ready to have a little fun.