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## The Columbus Dispatch / Injury riddled Columbus Blue Jackets split road trip after 3-2 loss to Buffalo Sabres

**By Brian Hedger – February 5, 2025**

The banged up Blue Jackets finished a costly four-game road trip Tuesday night with a frustrating 3-2 loss to the Buffalo Sabres at Harbor Center.

Playing without Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko and Sean Monahan — their injured top three scorers — the Blue Jackets came up short despite outshooting Buffalo 30-21 and pulling within a goal on Ivan Provorov's tally with 7:22 left in the third period. An intense push with a 6-on-5 advantage and their own net empty came up short for Columbus at the end, when Sabres backup goalie James Reimer (28 saves) preserved a one-goal lead to give the Sabres (22-26-5) their fourth straight win.

It was the second straight loss for the Blue Jackets (26-21-7), who dropped out of the second wild card in the Eastern Conference and trail both the Tampa Bay Lightning and Boston Bruins by a point. Alex Tuch scored two goals off deflections to break a 1-1 tie in the second for Buffalo, which took a 3-1 margin into the third. Bowen Byrum opened the scoring in the first to give the Sabres an early 1-0 lead, but Kent Johnson responded early in the second to tie it, 1-1, for the Blue Jackets.

Reimer, the Sabres' backup, was sharp while pressed into making an unexpected start replacing injured starter Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen. Elvis Merzlikins made 18 saves in his second straight loss for the Blue Jackets.

The loss was their first regulation defeat for Columbus in Buffalo since March 31, 2019, ending a 5-0-3 stretch with the Jackets earning at least one point at Harbor Center.

Next up for the Blue Jackets are home games Thursday against the Utah Hockey Club and Saturday against the New York Rangers at Nationwide Arena. Following those two, they'll get a needed break for almost two full weeks for the NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off in Boston and Montreal.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Two straight losses for Columbus Blue Jackets despite impressive effort: 4 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – February 5, 2025

Short-staffed from another injury spate, the Blue Jackets did what they've done all season Tuesday night at Harbor Center in Buffalo.

Despite falling 3-2 to the Buffalo Sabres to split a four-game road trip with their second consecutive loss, the battered Jackets fought to the final horn. Trailing 3-1 starting the third period, they nearly forced overtime after Ivan Provorov's goal with 7:22 remaining cut it to a one-goal deficit.

There just wasn't enough firepower to pull off a full comeback after adding Kirill Marchenko (fractured jaw), Zach Werenski (upper body) and Dante Fabbro (upper body) to a list of injured regulars that already included Boone Jenner (shoulder), Sean Monahan (wrist), Yegor Chinakhov (back) and Erik Gudbranson (shoulder).

Next up are home games Thursday against the Utah Hockey Club and Saturday against the New York Rangers before a break for the league's 4 Nations Face-Off, which can't arrive soon enough for the injury-plagued Blue Jackets.

Here are four takeaways:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets drop out of playoff spot after loss to Buffalo Sabres**

The loss in Buffalo dropped the Blue Jackets out of the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. They're now 26-21-7 and tied at 59 points with the Detroit Red Wings, whom the Jackets will host March 1 at Ohio Stadium.

The Red Wings and Blue Jackets each trail the Boston Bruins (27-22-6, 59 points) and Tampa Bay Lightning (28-20-4, 59 points) by a point as the NHL's mid-February pause nears. Behind those four are the New York Islanders (57 points), Rangers (54 points), Montreal Canadiens (53 points), Pittsburgh Penguins (53 points) and Philadelphia Flyers (52 points) in a clogged playoff chase.

Even the Sabres, who are last in the East with 49 points, are within 10 points of Detroit and Columbus.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets come up short against Buffalo Sabres despite dominant third period**

Structural coverage breakdowns in the second period cost the Blue Jackets again, but the game overall was one of their better statistical performances in a while. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets finished with edges in 5-on-5 scoring chances (21-20) and high-danger chances (10-9). They held the Sabres to just one shot in the third.

Going into Tuesday night's contest, they'd been outplayed in their previous 10 games in those categories despite going 6-3-1 and 4-1 in those games that went beyond regulation. Despite their massive personnel shortage in Buffalo, the Blue Jackets flipped the script on the Sabres.

That's the type of effort it'll take in their final two games this week.

### **Kent Johnson's backhand 'Spin-O-Rama' goal was lone bright spot for Columbus Blue Jackets**

Playing without their top three offensive weapons, the Blue Jackets were thrown into offensive disarray. Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson became the team's top two threats, and it was the latter who scored a highlight goal to tie it 1-1 early in the second period.

Getting the puck off on the left wing from James van Riemsdyk, Johnson used a quick reverse spin for a backhand 'Spin-O-Rama' shot that zipped past goalie James Reimer for his 16th goal of the season. It was also his 35th point in 40 games since missing 14 games in the season's first month.

Rather than moving to Fantilli's top line to replace Kirill Marchenko (broken jaw), Johnson stayed on the second line to continue playing with Van Riemsdyk. Rookie Luca Del Bel Belluz moved up from the third line to center the first group.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier hammered Buffalo Sabres defenseman David Gilbert in pointless opening bout**

Mathieu Olivier has developed a reputation as one of the NHL's heavyweight enforcers, so getting him to accept a fight has become a bit of a status symbol. The Sabres, however, had ulterior motives after stewing over their muted response to an illegal hit in their previous game against the New Jersey Devils that knocked top center Tage Thompson out of the lineup.

That's how Olivier wound up fighting Buffalo's David Gilbert off the opening faceoff in a scrap that looked like something out of the NHL of the 1980s or 1990s. Gilbert tried to reclaim some lost dignity for his teammates but wound up taking a straight right to the mouth followed by three massive rights to his helmeted head before he dropped to a knee to end it.

That fight wasn't a good look for the NHL, the Sabres or Gilbert, who took a needless beating from a player who had nothing to do with Buffalo's misguided angst.

## The Athletic / Barely recognizable Blue Jackets end 4-game trip with loss to Sabres

**By Aaron Portzline – February 4, 2025**

Despite long-term injuries to some of their top players, the Columbus Blue Jackets have managed to exceed expectations all season. But there's only so much one team can take.

Playing without two-thirds of their top forward line and both members of their top defensive pair — that's their three leading scorers, by the way — the Blue Jackets ended a four-game trip Tuesday with a 3-2 loss to the Buffalo Sabres before 14,198 in KeyBank Center.

The effort couldn't be questioned. But there's a subtle yet significant cost to be paid when players are elevated in the lineup, taking on different roles and playing with different linemates. All of that was evident in a slightly disjointed loss to the last-place club in the Eastern Conference.

"Maybe there was an element to juggling (the lineup and lines) a little bit," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Buffalo. "But we still have to get the job done. We still have to play the way we play. We got out of it for a little bit (in the second period) and it ends up in our net.

"But we certainly aren't upset with the effort."

Kent Johnson and Ivan Provorov scored for Columbus, which hadn't lost a regulation game to the Sabres in Buffalo in more than seven years. Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins allowed three goals on 21 shots, including two pucks that were deflected.

Johnson's goal, at 1:47 of the second period, was the game's highlight. Sprung by a pass off the wall from the neutral zone by linemate James van Riemsdyk, Johnson tracked the puck down and pulled to a quick stop on the left dot to create a bit of space with Sabres defenseman Bowen Byram.

Then, in a flash, Johnson spun around to his left and fired the puck off his backhand toward Buffalo goaltender James Reimer, the puck sailing past Reimer's mask and finding the far corner of the net.

"I thought (Byram) matched my speed pretty good," Johnson said. "I was thinking I'd drive him to the net, but I thought he was probably going to get me closed off. So I know that I can spin there and it's really tough for the D man. Luckily, I kinda had the perfect shot there."

Provorov's goal, which cut the Sabres' lead to 3-2 with 7:22 remaining, was a designed play off Luca Del Bel Belluz's faceoff win. Provorov streaked to the net right after the faceoff and defenseman Damon Severson sent a cross-zone pass right to Provorov's stick at the front of the net.

But this game was defined more by who wasn't on the ice than by what happened on the ice.

The Blue Jackets' loss in Dallas on Sunday was costly. Defenseman Zach Werenski, considered a candidate for the Norris Trophy, left Sunday's game after getting his arm tangled with a Dallas Stars player late in the second period. He returned later in that game but wasn't able to dress Tuesday.

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell declined to define the injury but said it wasn't considered serious. He said Werenski was "day to day," but it's unclear whether he'll be able to play in the Blue Jackets' next two games — Thursday versus the Utah Hockey Club and Saturday versus the New York Rangers, both in Nationwide Arena.

It also could call into question his availability to play for the United States in the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off tournament.

Beyond Werenski, the Blue Jackets also lost defenseman Dante Fabbro — Werenski's playing partner — to a head injury against the Stars, and leading scorer Kirill Marchenko suffered a broken jaw when he was hit by the puck while on the bench.

With those absences, the Blue Jackets moved center Cole Sillinger up to play in Marchenko's spot on the right side of the top line, and rookie Denton Mateychuk and Provorov moved up to replace Werenski and Fabbro as the Jackets' top defensive pair.

The Blue Jackets — who are also missing forwards Boone Jenner, Sean Monahan and Yegor Chinakhov as well as defenseman Erik Gudbranson — let the game slip away in the second half of the second period.

In the second period, the Sabres got deflected goals by Alex Tuch at 12:17 to take a 2-1 lead and at 18:56 to push the lead to 3-1. Merzlikins had no chance on either goal.

The Blue Jackets allowed Buffalo only one shot on goal in the third period, trying desperately to rally. Provorov's goal made it a one-goal game and gave them a fighting chance, but even with Merzlikins pulled for an extra skater with 2:30 remaining, they couldn't net the equalizer.

"We kind of shot ourselves in the foot in the second by giving up a couple of goals that, I would say, we kind of gave to them," Provorov said. "It wasn't anything special they did. In the third, we started playing the right way. We got one, but we couldn't tie it up. We're battling every game and every night. But tonight we just made a couple of mental mistakes that cost us the game."

The game started with a fight off the opening faceoff. Blue Jackets winger Mathieu Olivier stepped away from the center-ice circle and dropped his stick and gloves to the ice, and Sabres defenseman Dennis Gilbert skated forward to meet him.

You could almost see this one coming. The Blue Jackets, at the end of a long string of road games — eight of their last nine have been away from Nationwide, including this four-game, four-time-zone trip — needed a boost, especially with so many regulars suddenly sidelined.

The Sabres, meanwhile, spent the last couple of days in Buffalo having their toughness and camaraderie challenged after leading scorer Tage Thompson was hit high and injured by New Jersey's Stefan Noesen. (Thompson did not play Tuesday.)

Not only did it happen fast — according to the NHL it's tied for the earliest fight (:03 time elapsed) in franchise history — it was over almost as quickly. Olivier, thanks to his typical barrage of heavy rights, made quick work of Gilbert.

## [The Athletic / Is the 4 Nations break creating a mini NHL trade deadline? Here's what execs say](#)

By Pierre LeBrun – February 5, 2025

Some NHL teams held their pro scouting meetings a tad earlier than usual this season in order to accommodate an unusual NHL regular-season schedule featuring a 12-day break for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Some also have indicated in conversations with The Athletic going back as far as January that they hope to get their trade business done before the 4 Nations break as there will be only two weeks before the March 7 trade deadline coming out of the break.

It gives one the sense we might see a mini trade deadline before the 4 Nations break starts Feb. 10.

I understood the reasoning, but I still wasn't convinced we'd see multiple trades, if only for the traditional cap-era reason: Teams have little salary-cap room, leading them to wait until the last minute at the deadline when the cap hits are at the smallest.

Jim Rutherford has been the January Man for decades, the Hockey Hall of Fame executive renowned for early-season trades from his time as general manager with the Carolina Hurricanes and Pittsburgh Penguins and now working alongside GM Patrick Allvin with the Vancouver Canucks as president of hockey operations.

(Funnily enough, a year after acquiring Elias Lindholm on Jan. 31, the Canucks made a pair of trades last Friday, on Jan. 31 again; more on that later.)

Rutherford's belief over the years has been that the earlier the better for your new player, especially if it's a key player — so he can acclimatize himself properly.

All true. But it's not as if other teams haven't held the same belief. It's just that there are market circumstances that dictate why it's not easy to go early.

This season, there's the fact that many teams aren't sellers yet. Some players who aren't available yet will suddenly go on the market late. And, again, the most obvious factor is the cap.

But lo and behold, we definitely got some fireworks early.

- Friday, Jan. 24: The Hurricanes-Colorado Avalanche blockbuster, with Mikko Rantanen going to the Hurricanes and Martin Necas and Jack Drury to the Avalanche — plus the Chicago deep dish of Taylor Hall to Carolina.
- Thursday, Jan. 30: The sizeable Philadelphia Flyers-Calgary Flames trade, with Andrei Kuzmenko, Jakob Pelletier, Joel Farabee and Morgan Frost all swapping teams.
- Friday, Jan. 31: The long-rumored J.T. Miller deal to the Rangers, with the Canucks getting Filip Chytil and Victor Mancini and a conditional first-round pick. Then about five hours later, Vancouver used that first-round pick and a few other pieces to get pending unrestricted free agents Marcus Pettersson and Drew O'Connor from the Pittsburgh Penguins.
- Saturday, Feb. 1: Pending UFAs Mikael Granlund and Cody Ceci went to the banged-up Dallas Stars from the San Jose Sharks for a first-round pick and a conditional fourth-round pick.

Everyone, exhale.

It was quite an eight-day period. And in the end, nearly a third of the teams in the league did indeed make something happen before 4 Nations.

In reaching out to a number of the GMs involved in those deals, though, the reason they happened so early wasn't necessarily to beat the break.

"For us, it was more about the return and value being met," Sharks GM Mike Grier told *The Athletic*. "Ideally, we would have held onto Granlund closer to the deadline because of how important he was to our group. Once the price was met, we felt like we had to do it, and the 4 Nations played a little bit into that."

Indeed, Granlund being on Finland's 4 Nations roster also created some degree of risk. But as Grier said, the most important factor was that someone met his first-round-pick price tag. It's pretty doubtful there's a better return out there closer to March 7. Grier was sharp to cut bait when he did.

Ditto for another seller, GM Kyle Dubas in Pittsburgh. He had one of the top rental defensemen on the market in Pettersson, and once Vancouver agreed to pay a first-round-pick price tag — albeit a conditional top-13-protected Rangers first-round pick — there was no reason to wait any longer. But the 4 Nations break wasn't a factor.

"I don't think it's that big of a change from normal practice," Dubas told *The Athletic*. "Certainly, most trades get done closer to the deadline, but it seems that each year there are deals done late January. For us, the 4 Nations break had no bearing on our strategy. Circumstances around the league — between the Colorado-Carolina deal and the situation between Vancouver and New York — just prompted action, and our strategy was not going to change between now and the deadline."

The Flames, meanwhile, had been looking for a center all year. GM Craig Conroy and Flyers counterpart Daniel Briere had kept in touch most of the season on it.

"You know when you've been talking to teams right from the summer all the way through (the start of the season), nothing made sense, nothing made sense, nothing made sense; and it's weird how quickly this one came together," Conroy told *The Athletic*. "Danny and I had talked about the players before — like lots — and were talking a one-for-one swap, and then it just grew a little bit and a little bit more.

"You want to try and get ahead of it (the deadline) a little bit. But it all came together, and to be able to play five or six games before the break and then come back and have the guys kind of acclimatized, that was the big thing for us. To get them in here and get them playing."

That's a 4 Nations ripple effect I hadn't thought of: wanting new players to get games in before they disappear for 12 days.

"Once we figured out it made sense for us, and it made sense for Philly, let's get ahead of it now and get it done," Conroy said. "The timing just happened to work out. But if we could have done it a month ago, we would have done it, and if it didn't work out last week, then maybe it gets done closer to the deadline. But it definitely gives our players a boost and our team a boost and lets them have a little extra time as we're trying to make this push."

That timing for a Flames team in a legitimate playoff race was probably more important than for the Flyers, who are likely out of the postseason again as they continue their retool.

"For us, it had nothing to do with the 4 Nations or the trade deadline," Briere told *The Athletic*. "There were four players involved, and every game, you take the risk of an injury, so when the trade made sense for us, we just went ahead."



His point is that whether this was January or March or June or August, this was a traditional hockey trade not involving rentals that would have made sense for the Flyers any time of the year.

Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsky first started talking to Colorado about Rantanen last summer, so he, too, wasn't influenced by the 4 Nations break.

"It wasn't really about the break for us," Tulsky said via text message this week. "We just had a lot of moving parts in our discussions and that was when the timing came together for us."

The Canucks? Aside from their January trade inclination, let's be real here: Trading J.T. Miller would have happened several weeks earlier had the moons aligned. No need to delve deeper here into the dressing room drama that's been well publicized.

"I have been open for trades since the start of the season," the Canucks' Allvin told The Athletic. "Never was a conversation about timing on the trade for our end regarding the 4 Nations. Return was the key for us."

Fair enough, but imagine the disaster it might have been for Miller to get injured at 4 Nations while still on the Canucks roster — or for that matter Rantanen if he were still in Colorado. Especially Rantanen because he's a pending UFA.

So, as it turns out, there are mitigating factors that contributed to the eight days of trades that shook the NHL. The 4 Nations had a little part in it, but it doesn't appear to have been the driver.

## [The Athletic / NHL player poll: Best/worst facilities? NBA-style tournament? Season too long? Should Bettman retire?](#)

**The Athletic NHL Staff – February 5, 2025**

Everyone's allowed to complain about their job from time to time, even those who are making millions of dollars playing a game. Spend enough time in NHL locker rooms, and you'll hear gripes about facilities, about coaches, about teammates, about a city's nightlife or lack thereof, about escrow, about the relentless grind of an NHL season.

To give the league's rank-and-file a chance to air out their wants and wishes and complaints, The Athletic polled 111 players in recent months on a variety of topics, granting them anonymity so they could speak freely.

On Monday, we highlighted their thoughts on the 4-Nations Face-Off.

Today, we look into more everyday topics.

### **If you have a no-trade list, what's the first team on it?**

Poor Winnipeg. All the Jets have done is put themselves atop the league standings while playing in arguably the best in-game atmosphere in the NHL. Things are good enough up north for Connor Hellebuyck and Mark Scheifele to sign eight-year deals when the hockey world assumed they'd walk.

And yet, the Jets "win" this category running away. Every time.

"There's not much to do out there," one player said. "It's f—ing cold. I haven't heard a guy go to Winnipeg and be like, 'This is going to be my forever home.'"

"Nothing to do, bad food, freezing," another said.

Here's one Jets player's defense of his city, noting that the drive from the airport to downtown isn't exactly the scenic route: "I remember when I first did it, it was underwhelming. There are parts of the city that are great, but you don't see that (as a visiting player). I always wish that they'd stay down at the Forks or somewhere like that. I don't think that hotel meets the criteria for the league, but it would be better than staying downtown."

A few players offered a blanket rejection of the seven Canadian teams, given the weather and the taxes and the scrutiny. But just across Niagara Falls is another frequently cited spot, as the Sabres hurtle toward their 14th straight season without a playoff appearance.

"The way it's going there, Buffalo — it's just been kind of mucky there forever," one player said. "And for me right now in my career, I don't really need that. It's not gonna help me."

"High taxes, the organization hasn't been that strong recently," another player said. "They haven't made the playoffs in like 14 years. In saying that, I have some friends there and they love playing there."

"All they do is lose," another player said.

### **What coach would you most like to play for other than your own?**

One player just really, really, really disliked Philadelphia, to the point where you have to wonder if Gritty picked on him as a child.

"Honestly, I wouldn't even mind Winnipeg," he said. "It's not that nice, but I just hate Philly. I just hate Philly. I can't stand it. I can't stand the city, everything. It's the rink. It's just one city that I absolutely

despise. I can't stand it. I'd be sick if I got traded there. If I had a one-team no-trade list, they'd be on it in a second."

Not everybody is so picky, though.

"I'd feel lucky to play anywhere," one player said.

It's not surprising that three of the most successful coaches in the league top the list. Everyone wants to win, after all.

"I like his persona," one player said of the Tampa Bay Lightning's Jon Cooper.

One player who couldn't choose between Cooper and the Colorado Avalanche's Jared Bednar said: "Their teams play such nice hockey. They play fast. If I were to turn the TV on, I would probably look at those two teams because they play beautiful hockey."

Those who've played for Rod Brind'Amour with the Carolina Hurricanes inevitably become evangelists for him, and word spreads quickly throughout the league.

"I've heard he rewards players that are committed and work hard," one player said. "I think that would fit my traits and we could build a good relationship. He's someone you want to play for, and he's also had good success in Carolina. They've had good runs but have just come up short. Every year they've been there as one of the final teams."

"Seems like a very straightforward coach," another player said. "No matter what kind of team they have, or how it looks on paper, they're always a fast, hard-to-play team."

The Florida Panthers' Paul Maurice's big personality has won over plenty of players, too. Winning the Stanley Cup doesn't hurt.

"Those interviews during the playoffs?" another noted. "I mean, yeah. Hard not to like him."

The Philadelphia Flyers' John Tortorella tops the next list, but he garnered a few votes here, too — including one surprising one: the same player who really, really, really dislikes Philadelphia.

"He's in Philly, but I would just like to experience how it feels to be under Torts," he said. "There'd probably be some funny stuff going on on the bench. I'd just love to hear it sometime."

The curiosity factor was high with Tortorella.

"I'd like to experience Torts," another player said. "You hear stories. I'd like to see it for myself."

"I've heard he's got his team's back," another said. "He'll take care of his players."

### **What coach would you least like to play for?**

Tortorella topping the list is no surprise, though a few players came to his defense and noted that many players really like playing for him.

Bruce Cassidy at No. 2 is an interesting development, though, given the success he's had with the Vegas Golden Knights.

"That's what I'm hearing from around the league," one player said.

"I haven't heard too many good things about the Vegas coach, Cassidy," another said. "I don't really know him that well, but I haven't heard anything good about him."

One player didn't even know Anaheim Ducks coach Greg Cronin's name but picked him anyway: "Who is Anaheim's coach?"

"I've heard from other players that he's not great to play for," another player said. "They have a lot of decent skill that they should be a good team, but they're not."

Mike Babcock is a long shot to ever return to the league after his immediate flameout with the Columbus Blue Jackets, and that seems to be fine with the players polled.

"Been there," one player said. "Lived it."

"I just think he's too old," a player said. "I don't think he understands the game anymore. That's what I hear from the guys that play for him, that he just doesn't know what's going on most of the time."

Brind'Amour got a vote here, too. Sort of.

"Just because he's way more in shape than I am, so he'd be intimidating," a player said.

### **What NHL team has the best facilities for opposing teams?**

The newer the arena, the better the facilities. Makes sense, right? Though Utah's 34-year-old Delta Center drew some rave reviews.

"Utah was frickin' nice," one player said. "Like, they had a full-on gym for us. Ice cold tubs, hot tubs that were like \$10,000 each. We shared with the basketball guys. Our (visitors') room is huge. Medical room is bigger than our medical room here."

The Detroit Red Wings' Little Caesars Arena, Seattle Kraken's Climate Pledge Arena, Edmonton Oilers' Rogers Place, Golden Knights' T-Mobile Arena and New York Islanders' UBS Arena all opened in the past decade, and it shows.

"Really, any of the new rinks," one player said.

"All of the newer buildings are great," another said.

"I don't know which arena came first, UBS or Climate Pledge, but they're modeled very similarly," another player said. "They have a lot more room and it feels cleaner."

Players liked how Detroit offered players access to the NBA facilities.

"Just because of the gym," one Detroit voter said. "It's pretty nice. I don't know if the room's the best, but the gym's the best for sure."

"Not a lot of away spots have decent gym setups, but the newer rinks have setups that are acceptable, for the lack of a better word," another said. "Some are just stuck in a hallway on the concrete and it's not even a room. It's tougher to warm up in facilities like that. Detroit's gym comes to mind as a really good setup. You've got everything you need there, and it's well laid out."

Minnesota's Xcel Energy Center has by far the biggest visitors' locker room in the league.

"The locker room is unreal," one player said.

### **What NHL team has the worst facilities?**

You might want to play for Brind'Amour, but you don't want to play against him — and not just because his team forechecks so hard. Carolina ran away with this one, as players are forced to warm up and lift weights or ride the bike after the game in a hallway or a giant storage area. The locker room itself, despite a recent renovation that added about two whopping feet of width, might be the most cramped in the league, too.

"It used to be Carolina, but then they upgraded," one player said. "And somehow it's still Carolina."

"The visiting room sucks," another player said. "And the home room is basically the visiting room with some paint on the walls. So, yeah, pretty s----y."

"Terrible," another Carolina voter said.

"Carolina stinks," said another.

"It's brutal," said another. "It sucks. Everything about that trip sucks."

"Not even close," said another.

"Probably ours," one particularly sneaky Hurricanes player said. "This summer, they're supposed to change it up a little bit. We've been telling them to put it off."

There are many, many more comments like those, but let's stop piling on the Canes. There are other lousy rinks out there.

On Washington: "By far the worst. It's the smallest room ever and a million degrees in there. I hate playing there."

On Anaheim: "Anaheim is so bad. The dressing room is fine, but the other amenities, like the cold tub and where you warm up, it's in an old office. You don't know where you're going. It's the worst in the league."

On Calgary: "I hate saying that, because I love playing in that building. But the setup there is not cool."

On Colorado: "It sucks."

On Madison Square Garden: "It's just so small. You don't have anywhere to warm up."

On Toronto: "Toronto is awful. There's not even a curtain. There's just some stuff in the corner of the lower level or whatever. You're just on the gross, dirty concrete. But that's more common than you'd think."

### **Do you like the idea of an in-season tournament like the NBA's?**

Players were split on this one. The NBA Cup has made for some memorable games, but some NHL players found it "gimmicky" and "corny."

Of course, if it raises hockey-related revenue, that's a different story.

"I haven't looked if it drives revenues, but if it does, I wouldn't be against it," one player said. "I don't see any harm in it."

"I think it's good," another said. "Extra revenue. Gets fans more involved in the game. More rivalries."

"It'd be good to grow the game," another said. "Lot of higher-stake games in the middle of a season."

It also could break up the relentless monotony of the NHL season.

"I think it'd mix it up," a player said. "Chance to win some money. Fun way to break up the season. Guys would get into it."

"Any time you can pick up the competitive level in the middle of the season, it helps," another player said. "Especially the times when the season gets long in the middle."

Some players preferred more international play instead.

"It should be something like the 4 Nations, on a global scale," one player said.

"You would still play against the same teams, same lineups, so I don't think it would have so much of a future in this sport," another player reasoned. "I would understand if you play, how in soccer they play Champions League or in the Premier League they play FA Cup with the teams from lower leagues. ... This one you would still play against the same teams, against the same lineups. I don't think it would be that interesting for us. We'd have just more games to play."

Some players turned their noses up at the idea of competing for a lesser trophy than the Stanley Cup.

"We play for the hardest trophy in the world," one said.

"I think the only tournament that matters should be playoffs," another said.

"We play for the Stanley Cup," another said. "We don't play for an in-season tournament banner."

### **Is the season too long?**

Of the 108 who responded, 47 had a comment with their vote. Ten of them mentioned either shortening or eliminating the preseason.

"Preseason is too long," one player said, before diving into The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun's favorite talking point. "I think we should start third week of September. June 1 should be Game 7 of the Cup Final."

"Sounds like Gary (Bettman) wants to expand even more," one player said. "We have to add more games. Is it too long? Is it very long? Yeah. Especially for the grind of hard skating is, how much toll it takes, the physicality. You look at basketball: They do significant load management for their big guys. They jog around half the game, fire up a couple threes and they're taking load management. Which is wild. And we're grinding through 82. The mentality, shot-blocking — it's not even the same stratosphere."

"I think 72 to 75 would probably be better, especially for teams going deep every year," another player said.

"I just find the way these back-to-backs are set up are insane sometimes," another player said. "I think there would be (a higher) quality of games if we had less."

Players have grown accustomed to the 82-game season, and the ebbs and flows it creates.

"If it was a little shorter, you'd see the teams that got off to a slow start not be able to catch up," one "no" voter said. "And vice versa, where teams start off hot and tail off at the end. I think it's a good balance. It gives young guys an opportunity to come up at the end of the season and play."

There's the financial component, too.

"I would like it to be 62 games," one player said. "I think that would be perfect. But I understand the economics of it and if we play 62 games, we're all going to get paid 75 percent of what we make. I think people have talked about playing less exhibition games and adding two more season games so we can make even more money. In a perfect world, I think 62 would be right."

Mostly, this one was met with a collective shrug.

"You could take it down to like 70; that'd be perfect," one player said. "But then it's just 12 extra games. Just play them."

"The season is long," another said. "But it's the hardest trophy in sports to win, right? It's supposed to be hard."

## Should Gary Bettman retire?

Believe it or not, Bettman has a lot of supporters around the league. And this poll was conducted before the league announced a skyrocketing salary cap that's going to make players even richer.

"I think he's done a great job with the league," one player said. "It keeps growing."

"We've had the least turmoil of most leagues," said one player, who must not have been paying attention in 1994, 2004 or 2012. "I'm fine with him."

"I feel like he's done a pretty good job with our sport in terms of getting TV deals," another said. "Obviously, it was crappy timing with COVID and escrow and whatnot, but I feel like the salary cap is going up, TV deals are going up. I think our sport is in a good spot, so he's done a decent job."

"This may be unpopular, but I think he's done a nice job of stabilizing our league," another said.

"He's put the league in a good spot," another said. "He's ready, but if he keeps growing the game ... we're not playing escrow anymore ... why leave now?"

"The culture of the league needs to change," one said. "The league needs to make hockey more accessible to lots of people. Stephen A. Smith doesn't get fired up about hockey, and he should be."

"I think it would be good to have a fresh face," another said.

"It's such a hard job," another said. "You're not ever going to be liked. He had a good run. Let somebody else step in now."

A couple of players said they expect Bettman to step down after one last collective-bargaining agreement so he can leave the league in a good place.

Then there was this player: "I don't even know what that f—ing guy does."

## ESPN / NHL Awards WATCH: Who's leading for Hart, Norris, Calder and more?

By Greg Wyshynski – February 4, 2025

The NHL's most valuable player award winners usually have one thing in common: They aren't goaltenders or defensemen.

There are all sorts of justifications for the Hart Trophy almost exclusively going to forwards: Like the fact that goalies and defensemen have their own awards or the classic "a goalie could be MVP every season!" harangue. The bottom line is that of the past 30 Hart Trophies, four went to goaltenders and one went to a defenseman.

That trend could be bucked this season, however. Not only is a goaltender leading the pack for the Hart, two defensemen are getting some MVP consideration as well.

Welcome to the NHL Awards Watch for February. We've polled a wide selection of Professional Hockey Writers Association voters anonymously to get a sense of where the wind is blowing for the current leaders. We've made sure it's a cross-section from the entire league, trying to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Keep in mind that the PHWA votes for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke and Lady Byng; broadcasters vote for the Jack Adams; and general managers handle the Vezina.

### **Hart Trophy (MVP)**

What a difference a long-term injury makes.

The front-runner for the Hart Trophy in last month's Awards Watch was Kirill Kaprizov of the Minnesota Wild with 37% of the first-place votes. But he played only three games in January and is currently on long-term injured reserve after surgery on a lingering lower-body issue. He's still the Wild's leading scorer with MVP numbers (23 goals and 52 points) but his 37 games played isn't enough to keep pace in this highly competitive race. Kaprizov didn't receive a first-place vote in this month's balloting.

The new leader is Hellebuyck, the Jets' starting goaltender and last season's Vezina Trophy winner. While he didn't receive a first-place vote last month, he was a close second for a few voters. This time, he has earned 25% of the first-place votes, which is indicative of how tightly packed the MVP race is right now.

"Who has been more consistent and more vital to his team's success?" asked one voter.

"He's the best goalie by a long shot and on the best team in the league," said another.

The Jets have 37 wins this season. Hellebuyck has 33 of them. He leads all goalies (minimum 20 appearances) in save percentage (.925) and goals-against average (2.04). Hellebuyck leads all goalies in minutes played and shots faced, the latter of which he has done four times in his career.

The NHL hasn't had a goalie win MVP since Montreal's Carey Price in 2014-15.

MacKinnon was a runner-up last month and is once again this month, capturing just over 20% of the vote. He leads the NHL with 80 points in 54 games. There's a 22-point gap between MacKinnon and Cale Makar on the Colorado scoring leaderboard.

MacKinnon won the Hart last season. The NHL hasn't had back-to-back MVPs since Alex Ovechkin won the award in 2008 and '09.



"Nathan MacKinnon for the back-to-back, but let's not sleep on Leon Draisaitl," said one voter.

Draisaitl was the other runner-up last month and remains just slightly ahead of Quinn Hughes in this month's vote. Draisaitl had roughly 20% of the first-place ballots. Hughes was around 15%.

Draisaitl leads the NHL in goals (36) and is second to MacKinnon in points (77). He won the Hart once previously, in 2019-20.

According to Evolving Hockey, Draisaitl leads the NHL in goals scored above replacement (17.8) and wins above replacement (2.9). Teammate Connor McDavid is second in both categories. McDavid has also nearly matched Draisaitl in points per game (1.46 to 1.48), playing 46 games to Leon's 52. McDavid, who didn't receive a first-place MVP vote, has 67 points.

"I'm torn between Leon Draisaitl and Quinn Hughes but ultimately I will go with Hughes," said one voter. "He is completely dominating on the ice in all phases and the Canucks wouldn't be anywhere close to the playoffs without him."

Hughes has a slim lead over Makar in the scoring race among defensemen with 59 points in 47 games, skating 25:18 per game. There's a 25-point gap between Hughes and the next-highest scorer on the Vancouver roster (Conor Garland). Hughes is third in the NHL in goals scored above replacement (16.5) and wins above replacement (2.7), right behind Draisaitl and McDavid.

Only one other player received multiple Hart Trophy first-place votes in our survey: Tampa Bay Lightning star Nikita Kucherov, who won the award in 2018-19.

Kucherov has 24 goals and 76 points in 49 games. That's 22 points better than the Bolts' second-leading scorer, Brandon Hagel. Kucherov's 1.55 points per game leads the NHL. If he stays on that pace, it would be the ninth-best average over the past 20 seasons.

"While Kucherov is far from alone on his team, he does not have the elite support most of the other candidates have," said one voter.

"The NHL's preeminent playmaker -- who should've won this last year -- is averaging a whopping 0.78 primary assists per game," said another voter. "While others can debate MacKinnon vs. Leon Draisaitl vs. Connor Hellebuyck for the league's ultimate individual prize, Kucherov will go about his usual business of potting a point and a half per night while helping his club into a comfortable playoff position in the East - again."

Two other players earned votes for the Hart. Toronto Maple Leafs winger Mitch Marner's 70 points in 52 games put him fourth in scoring. He is also tied for fourth among forwards with Kucherov in goals scored above replacement (16.1). Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski leads his team in scoring (57 points) while skating an NHL-high 26:48 per game.

"If Columbus makes the playoffs, Zach Werenski will be a compelling candidate for the same reason as Kucherov -- he does not have the elite support," said one voter.

### **Norris Trophy (top defenseman)**

He might not be in the MVP top three, but Hughes is leading the Norris vote again.

Hughes won the Norris last season. The NHL hasn't had a back-to-back Norris winner since Nicklas Lidstrom won the award three straight years (2006-08) with the Detroit Red Wings. Hughes earned 45% of the first-place votes.

Hughes leads all defensemen in points (57) and is tied with Werenski in even-strength points among defensemen (37). Unlike Werenski and Makar, Hughes does not see significant time on the penalty kill, averaging just 10 seconds shorthanded per game.

"Vancouver is messy, but Quinn's special again this year," said one voter.

The Columbus Blue Jackets continue to be one of the best stories of the season, challenging for a playoff seed in the Eastern Conference after an unfathomably tragic offseason.

Werenski has had as good a season as any defenseman in the NHL, from his scoring (57 points) to his all-situations ice time. He earned 35% of the first-place votes, the clear second choice to Hughes. This is easily the most awards buzz Werenski has received; he has never finished higher than eighth in the Norris voting.

"I'm going Zach Werenski. He's been leading the charge for Columbus, who is in a wild-card spot and still in the thick of the playoff race. He's a big reason why," said one voter.

"Should they ultimately end up securing a playoff spot by season's end, the Columbus Blue Jackets will have one figure to credit more than any other," said another voter.

Makar's season-long hold on the Norris lead is over, as he received a smaller percentage of the first-place votes than Werenski and Hughes. Makar is second in scoring among defensemen with 58 points in 54 games. His underlying defensive numbers remain strong: The Avalanche give up fewer goals per 60 minutes with Makar on the ice (2.03) than the Blue Jackets do with Werenski (2.07) or the Canucks do with Hughes (2.17).

"It's a very tight race between Hughes and Makar. Hughes seems to be doing a little more with a little less in Vancouver, but this likely will come down to the wire. Maybe whichever one helps his team make the playoffs?" said one voter. "Both are just so much fun to watch."

These three defensemen were the only ones to receive a first-place vote. The only other defenseman who earned a mention from the voters was Josh Morrissey of the Winnipeg Jets.

### **Calder Trophy (top rookie)**

The Macklin Celebrini train keeps chugging along but the gap has closed.

Last month, the San Jose Sharks forward had 90% of the first-place votes. It is now down to 60%: a significant lead, but not an insurmountable one.

Celebrini, 18, has 16 goals and 21 assists in 42 games, missing a chunk of time to injury earlier this season. He has scored just 11 of his 37 points on the power play; the Sharks have the 26th-ranked unit in the league. His 0.88 points per game would rank in the top 15 for rookies since the 2005-06 season.

"With Mikael Granlund now traded [to Dallas], Macklin Celebrini is going to run away with the Calder. He will be forced into a more prominent role and ... is already better than what the Sharks expected," said one voter.

"Works just as hard skating toward his goaltender as he does skating away from him," said another voter.

While Celebrini is still the leader, the finalists had a significant change: Philadelphia Flyers star rookie Matvei Michkov drops out of the top three and didn't earn a first-place vote. He has 34 points in 52 games, but January/February has not been kind to him (2 goals and 2 assists in 15 games), and coach John Tortorella has played him fewer than 10 minutes in a couple of games. Still, he's among the league's top rookie point producers.

Moving up into the top three is Wolf, the outstanding rookie goalie for the Calgary Flames. He's tied for fifth in the NHL in save percentage (.917), with a 19-9-2 record. Money Puck has him ninth in goals saved above expected (12.5).

Unlike the other leaders for the Calder, Wolf's team is currently in a playoff spot. There's a very good argument to be made that the Flames wouldn't be there were it not for Wolf, and that could fuel his candidacy. He earned 25% of the vote.

"It's Wolf -- provided the Flames make the playoffs," said one voter.

Hutson was a finalist last month and earned the rest of the first-place votes this month. The Canadiens rookie is lapping the field among defensemen in rookie scoring: His 39 points in 52 games is over 30 points higher than that of the next-highest-scoring first-year defenseman.

"Give me Lane Hutson -- what a stud," said one voter.

"I usually give a lot of weight to rookie defensemen playing big minutes on competitive teams. We'll see how competitive the Canadiens will be, but for me, Hutson's playing a difficult role in games that are meaningful in the standings," said another voter. "But this is very tight with Celebrini and Wolf."

Despite his stats, Hutson still has to overcome the current leader in hype and perception.

"Maybe one day I'll crack on Hutson, but Celebrini is still my pick," said one voter.

### **Vezina Trophy (top goaltender)**

It's not exactly a shock to see a goalie leading the MVP race also leading for the NHL's top goaltending prize. A goaltender has won the Hart Trophy four times since the criteria for the Vezina Trophy was adopted in 1981-82. All four times, they also won the Vezina.

Through 42 games, Hellebuyck led the NHL in wins (33), shutouts (6), save percentage (.925) and goals-against average (2.04) in propelling the Jets to the top of the Western Conference. He earned 80% of the vote from our panelists.

"This isn't particularly close," said one voter.

"Just put his name on it already," said another voter.

"The gap is widening in what was already becoming a runaway race, and that's saying something because Logan Thompson has been spectacular," said another voter.

Ah yes, the Logan Thompson of it all. The Washington Capitals goalie had a 23-2-4 record through 29 games. Again, that's two regulation losses in 29 appearances. You have to go back only two seasons to find a goalie who had stellar stats but was an undeniable Vezina winner because of his record: Linus Ullmark of the Boston Bruins, who went a remarkable 40-6-1.

Thompson is right there with Hellebuyck in save percentage (.924) and just a shade behind in goals against average (2.15). He actually has a slightly better analytics case than Hellebuyck according to StatHletes with 0.38 goals saved above expected per 60 minutes to Hellebuyck's 0.26.

Thompson received 15% of the votes.

"Logan Thompson has entered the chat, and rightfully so. He doesn't take on the same workload as Connor Hellebuyck, but my goodness he's been an absolute brick wall," said one voter.

The only other goalie to receive a first-place vote was Wolf. He doesn't have the stats that Hellebuyck and Thompson have, either traditionally or analytically, but he has arguably done more with less in front of him.

Leaving the top three is Jacob Markstrom of the New Jersey Devils. His record (21-9-5) and stats (.912 save percentage, 2.20 goals-against average) are solid, but he has been out with a knee injury since Jan. 22 and should remain out through the 4 Nations Face-Off break.

### **Selke Trophy (best defensive forward)**

The good news for Reinhart is that he has a slowly building voting bloc that appreciates his defensive acumen, as the Florida Panthers forward enters the top three for the Selke after receiving only one first-place vote last month. Reinhart earned 25% of the first-place votes from our panel. He returns to the top three after falling out last month.

The bad news is that he'll have to overcome linemate Barkov, who has won the Selke twice in the past four seasons, including in 2023-24. Barkov remains the leader for this year's Selke with 60% of the first-place votes.

"Just name the award after him already. He's the Finnish Patrice Bergeron," said one voter.

"He remains at another level with his defensive stickwork. That and his deceptive speed are what set him apart," said another voter.

There's an analytic argument for Reinhart over Barkov for the Selke. The Panthers have a lower goals-against per 60 minutes (1.76) with Reinhart on the ice this season than Barkov (1.88). The same goes for expected goals against for Reinhart (1.82) vs. Barkov (2.02). The Panthers have a higher 5-on-5 save percentage (.926) with Reinhart on the ice than Barkov (.921). Obviously, it's all very close and the two have played the majority of their time together -- both also kill penalties -- which makes parsing the numbers more challenging.

Mitch Marner of the Toronto Maple Leafs was a finalist last month but didn't receive a first-place vote this round. Replacing him in the top three is Nico Hischier of the New Jersey Devils, who received 15% of the first-place votes. He was second for the Selke in 2022-23 and has been in that tier of players that could rise up to win one soon. The Devils have a 1.69 goals-against per 60 minutes with Hischier on the ice.

Alas, the Devils' captain is currently week-to-week with an upper-body injury.

"That injury is going to affect his status here, no doubt. And that's sad," said one voter.

Jordan Staal was the only other player to receive multiple first-place votes. The Carolina Hurricanes' captain has been searching for his first Selke win for 15 years and finished second for the award last season. The Hurricanes average 1.79 goals against per 60 minutes with Staal on the ice.

Other players receiving first-place votes for the Selke were Tampa Bay Lightning center Anthony Cirelli, who was a finalist in December and Vegas Golden Knights center Jack Eichel (the Knights give up only 1.9 goals against per 60 minutes with him on the ice). He also kills penalties effectively.

### **Lady Byng Trophy (gentlemanly play)**

This is the part where I mention that the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play should be voted on by the league's on-ice officials or by the NHL Players' Association instead of the PHWA.

Traditionally, this award goes to a player with a top-20 point total and the lowest penalty minutes among those players. Brayden Point is outside the top 20 in scoring (he is 25th) but has just one penalty in 46 games. That's incredible! His lone penalty was Nov. 30 against the Toronto Maple Leafs, a tripping minor. So, like, not even one of the nasty penalties.

### **Jack Adams Award (best coach)**

The Washington Capitals remain near the top of the NHL, and Carbery continues to get the credit for it. The second-year NHL head coach earned 85% of the first-place votes from our panel. That's down from his unanimous claim to the top spot last month, but it makes him the heaviest favorite for any award on the ballot.

"It's not even close," said one voter.

Some of this love comes from the preseason expectations for the Capitals, which the team has thoroughly transcended.

"Show of hands: Who had the Capitals in a legit battle for the Presidents' Trophy by early February?" asked one voter. "When it's all going right, you have to credit the common denominator behind the bench."

Said another voter: "He's extracting every drop from that Caps team, and it's been a lot of fun to watch. Curious how their style adapts when the postseason arrives, but we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

The Blue Jackets' playoff push has resulted in Evason's candidacy for the Jack Adams. Evason, in his first year in Columbus, has helped lead his team through palpable grief in the preseason to an unexpected run to the Eastern Conference bubble. He earned 10% of the vote.

The only other coach to earn a first-place vote is Arniel, who has the Jets tangling with the Capitals for best record in the league. But even one of his supporters couldn't resist the job that Carbery has done.

"I've changed my vote from Scott Arniel to Spencer Carbery," said one voter. "Even when his team was in an offensive slump, Carbery got the most out of his team and now they are scoring again and winning, a lot. He's galvanized the group and gotten the most out of every player."