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The Athletic / Blue Jackets blow past Blackhawks, arrive at Olympic break as NHL's hottest club

By Aaron Portzline – February 5, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The entire hockey world is looking forward to the Olympics, especially after a 12-year hiatus by the NHL. Every player in the league can use an in-season three-week break with all of the bumps and bruises from a compacted schedule.

But a small part of the Columbus Blue Jackets, the hottest club in the NHL right now, has to be thinking ... now? This is when we stop playing?

The Blue Jackets hit the break with a 4-0 win over the Chicago Blackhawks before a beyond-capacity crowd of 18,575 at Nationwide Arena, their seventh consecutive win and 11th win in 12 games dating to Jan. 11.

The flurry of wins has pushed them into the middle of the Eastern Conference playoff race, a remarkable about-face from where the season was headed before they hired Rick Bowness as coach.

“You can’t predict that, but I definitely felt like we had the team in here to do it,” Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. “We had a lot of home games, and we’re usually a good team at home, but we beat some good teams. We went on the road and took care of business.

“I feel like when we play the way we’ve been playing with the guys we have in this room, it definitely doesn’t surprise me.”

The Blue Jackets have had longer winning streaks — their 16 straight wins during the 2016-17 season is tied for second-longest in NHL history — but they’d never won seven consecutive games in regulation before this streak that was extended on Wednesday.

Goaltender Jet Greaves made 21 saves for his second shutout of the season, just 24 hours after Elvis Merlikins had a 24-save shutout in a 3-0 road win against the New Jersey Devils.

The last time the Blue Jackets had back-to-back shutouts by two different starters was during the 2010-11 season, when Mathieu Garon (at the San Jose Sharks) and Steve Mason (at home against the Nashville Predators) went back-to-back.

When Bowness first walked into Nationwide Arena on Jan. 12, he was stressing better defensive play, penalty killing, etc. The Blue Jackets have responded, and the goaltenders have benefited dramatically.

That’s three shutouts and only 13 goals allowed during the seven consecutive wins.

“Bones really harps on the details (of defending), and the guys have done a good job responding to that and answering the challenge he’s brought to us,” Greaves said. “It’s shown in the performance and the result.

“There are still a lot of areas we can all still get better at, and we’re still learning and trying to work on every day. We still have a lot of work ahead of us for us to grow.”

Werenski, Ivan Provorov, Danton Heinen and Sean Monahan scored goals for the Blue Jackets, who led 3-0 early in the second period and seemed in full control from the start.

“We’re realizing the right way to play,” Bowness. “We’re starting to understand when we can and cannot make plays, so we’re not turning the puck over as much. The structure has been good, but you can give the players a ton of credit, man.

“They’ve been working their butts off. They have. It’s all on them. They just bought it, and I couldn’t be more proud of the guys.”

Werenski’s goal, coming 4:46 into the game, was his 20th of the season. He’s only the 23rd defenseman in NHL history — and the fourth among active players — to have three 20-goal seasons.

A change of plans has Werenski leaving Thursday morning for Milan, where he’ll represent Team USA in the Olympics for the first time. Merlikins will represent Latvia, which happens to play the United States on the first day of the tournament.

Werenski has been pinching himself about this opportunity, repeatedly calling it “the opportunity of a lifetime.” He’d have a blast in Italy no matter what, he said, but the fact that the Blue Jackets have righted their ship will make it easier.

“Just knowing where we’re at, knowing what we’ve accomplished, knowing what we’re building ... we know we’re in a great spot right now and guys should enjoy their break,” Werenski said. “(Elvis and I) can go and enjoy Milan and know we’re in a great spot when we get back here.

“That was our goal when we were slipping a little bit earlier this season, to get back in it by the Olympic break. We’re right there, and we feel really confident right now.”

The win pulled the Blue Jackets to within two points of the New York Islanders for third place in the Metropolitan Division, and to within four points of the Boston Bruins for the second wild-card spot in the East.

On the wax board in the Blue Jackets’ dressing room postgame were written the first two games that await the Blue Jackets when the games resume. The Jackets play on the road against the Boston Bruins on Feb. 26 and at home against the Islanders on Feb. 28. They resume practice on Feb. 18.

“We’re going to have some hard practices, and we’ll get them ready, because we’re coming out of the gate with Boston and Islanders, two teams, I believe, we can catch,” Bowness said. “But there’s a lot of hard work ahead of us when we come back.”

When Bowness first arrived, he tried to puff up the Blue Jackets’ confidence and get them believing that a second-half charge was possible. They’ve been on burner ever since, and now he’s trying to keep them humble amid the 11-1-0 run.

“The reality is, we just got 22 points out of 24, and we still don’t have a playoff spot,” Bowness said. “So we have to keep pushing. We have to keep getting better.”

The Athletic / Blue Jackets win sixth straight behind Elvis Merzlikins' first shutout of the season

By Aaron Portzline – February 4, 2026

NEWARK, N.J. — When Dante Fabbro first looked at the gash across the top of his left foot, he knew it was bad news. But was it short-term bad news — a bunch of stitches, maybe a couple of weeks — or really bad news, like a season-ending injury?

As it turns out, Fabbro missed only six games, and he returned to the Columbus Blue Jackets lineup in style Tuesday with a third-period goal that unlocked a 0-0 tie against a Metropolitan Division rival.

Mathieu Olivier scored two goals, and goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, in his Olympic tune-up, had 24 saves for his first shutout in 70 games, guiding the Blue Jackets to a 3-0 win over the New Jersey Devils before 15,551 in Prudential Center.

“I’m very thankful that I’m healthy again and able to play this year, and obviously getting to see the boys doing what they’ve been doing is amazing,” Fabbro said. “It’s a big credit to them to get us back into this race, and, obviously, I just want to come in here and do what I can to help the guys win.”

The Blue Jackets are 10-1-0 since Jan. 10, including a 9-1-0 record since coach Rick Bowness took over for Dean Evason. Within that, they’ve won six consecutive games for the first time since the final six games of last season.

It has pulled Columbus, which was last in the Eastern Conference when this hot streak began, to within 4 points of the New York Islanders for third place in the Metro and within 5 points of the Boston Bruins for the final wild-card spot.

“We’re really sticking to the details and really making sure that we don’t let anything (negative) creep into our game right now,” Olivier said. “There are always positives in our game, but I think (Bowness) is on top of what we need to do better every night.

“We also expect more out of each other. Just the way we talk on the bench now, the way we’re reacting to plays, to plays that maybe we shouldn’t make. Guys are holding each other accountable.”

Bowness has made it a point to involve Merzlikins and Jet Greaves, who had emerged as the starting goaltender under Evason. That’s the reality of the schedule, which is condensed for the Olympics, beginning later this week in Milan.

Merzlikins has shown his appreciation, too. The shutout was the 12th of his career and his first since Oct. 30, 2024, against the New York Islanders. On Tuesday, Merzlikins showed his best rebound control this season, and his glove was unusually smooth.

Latvia, rejoice. It looks as if Merzlikins is ready for the Olympics.

“The last few games, honestly, I was (treating) them as exhibition games for the Olympics,” Merzlikins said. “I was trying, mentally, to get ready for that. Obviously, I play for my team, my club, but I imagined that I was already there (in Italy), trying to have some flow, feeling the puck, you know? Because as soon as I’m going to get there, we’re not going to have much time.”

It’s no coincidence that Merzlikins’ first shutout of the season and Greaves’ first shutout took place within a six-game span after Bowness took over. He came to town, after all, preaching that the first area of improvement would be checking, defending and playing with more pace and aggression. That’s allowed them to play in tight games without getting frazzled or hemmed into their own zone so long that an opponent’s goal seems inevitable.

Tuesday’s game was a 0-0 chess match into the third period.

“(The Devils) weren’t giving us much,” Bowness said. “That was a hard-checking, hard-fought game. We stayed with it. We got the first one and then we played really well after that, we built on that. We get that second goal, and that’s huge.”

Fabbro sailed in a wrister from the right circle at 5:24 of the third period, making it 1-0. When Olivier got behind the Devils defense and scored on a breakaway to double the lead at 12:05, Devils fans started booing. Some headed for the exits.

Olivier made it 3-0 with four minutes remaining when he got behind the Devils defense again, this time with an empty New Jersey net. Before he could release a shot, however, he was slashed by Devils defenseman Dougie Hamilton, an automatic goal with an empty net.

“I knew the rule, yeah,” Olivier said. “He broke my stick, so I knew right away, because I had position on him and I was most likely going to get the puck in the net. I was actually expecting (the NHL official) to maybe not give it. I was ready to argue.”

The Blue Jackets played Tuesday’s game without winger Kirill Marchenko, who fell victim to the flu-like bug that’s been ripping through the Columbus dressing room. Bowness moved forward Isac Lundeström into Marchenko’s spot to start the game, but he was replaced by the second period with Danton Heinen. There’s a chance Marchenko will play Wednesday when the Blue Jackets host the Chicago Blackhawks in Nationwide Arena.

On Tuesday, it was Fabbro’s return that provided a lift. He’s been out of the lineup since he was cut early in a Jan. 17 game at Pittsburgh after an entanglement with Penguins star Sidney Crosby.

A skate blade — nobody’s sure whether it was Fabbro’s right foot, or one of Crosby’s — sliced through the tongue of his skate and through the cut-resistant socks before lacerating the top of his foot. General manager Don Waddell said it was as “ugly” a cut as he’s seen.

“I thought I was done for the year,” Fabbro said. “I had a lot of things going through my mind. I just saw it, and I was like, ‘This is not good.’”

“I got very lucky. Credit to the trainers and the doctors and everybody who helped me try to get back to a full 100 percent. I just feel very fortunate to still be playing this year.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Greaves' shutout leads Columbus Blue Jackets to seventh straight win

By Brian Hedger – February 4, 2026

They didn't play inspiring hockey Feb. 4 at Nationwide Arena, but that wasn't atop the Blue Jackets' priorities list in their final game before the NHL's 2026 Winter Olympics break.

Winning a seventh straight game was all that mattered, and the Jackets got that done to sweep their second straight back-to-back set with a 4-0 victory over the Chicago Blackhawks.

The win, which pushed their winning streak to its highest number since a 10-game streak in 2017-18, moves the Blue Jackets (29-20-7, 65 points) within two points of the New York Islanders (31-21-5, 67 points) for third in the Metropolitan Division. They're 11-1-0 in their last 12 games, 10-1-0 since head coach Rick Bowness was hired to replace Dean Evason and own the NHL's longest winning streak.

"The reality is we just got 22 points out of 24 [possible] and we still don't have a playoff spot," Bowness said. "So, we have to keep pushing. We have to keep getting better."

First, however, they'll rest and recover.

Other than Olympics-bound defenseman Zach Werenski (U.S.) and goalie Elvis Merzlikins (Latvia), the rest of Blue Jackets now get a couple weeks off to recharge before returning to practice Feb. 18 to prepare for a 26-game sprint to the finish line April 14 against the Washington Capitals.

Werenski, Ivan Provorov and Danton Heinen scored the first three goals against the Blackhawks to build a 3-0 lead starting the third period, and that was all they needed thanks to goalie Jet Greaves' 21-save shutout behind a strong defensive effort.

Sean Monahan scored the fourth goal into an empty net to seal the victory, which was Greaves' second shutout of the season and fourth of his NHL career. The Blue Jackets also got a shutout from Merzlikins on Feb. 3 at the New Jersey Devils, which makes the two shutouts their first consecutive shutouts since 2019-20, when Merzlikins twice strung together consecutive shutouts.

It's the first time in franchise history two goalies pitched shutouts on back-to-back nights, and the first time since it's happened for any Blue Jackets goalie since Sergei Bobrovsky completed back-to-back shutouts Feb. 22-23, 2019 against the Ottawa Senators and San Jose Sharks.

Bowness, meanwhile, tied six other coaches for the least amount of games (11) to collect 10 wins with an organization. Ironically, former Blue Jackets coach Scot Arniel did it last season with the Winnipeg Jets in his first season following Bowness' retirement there.

Measuring up to this level of success will be difficult for the Jackets to match when they next play Feb. 26 in Boston, but it's quite a way to start a vacation.

"It's going to be a challenge for every team, right?" Bowness said. "We're all in the same boat. We all knew this was coming. Every team knew this was coming. Teams will play tomorrow and teams will play a little earlier than when we come back, so it's our job as coaches to look at the schedule and then we've got to practice these days. You can't practice 12 straight days. You can't practice four straight days. But it's up to the coaches to get the most out of them, and I know they'll come back in great shape."

Columbus Blue Jackets playoff picture

Picking up two more points, the Blue Jackets head into the break with 65 points in 56 games, moving within two points of the New York Islanders (67 points) for third place in the Metropolitan Division and three points of the Pittsburgh Penguins (68 points) for second.

The Jackets are four points behind the Boston Bruins (69 points) for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference, which doubles as the East's last ticket into the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The NHL has one more night of action Feb. 5 before the entire league pauses for the Olympics, and the Penguins, Islanders and Washington Capitals (63 points) all have scheduled games that could affect the Blue Jackets' playoff deficit when play resumes.

The Columbus Dispatch / Here's why Columbus Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier was awarded a goal

By Brian Hedger – February 4, 2026

Mathieu Olivier was prepared to fight.

The Blue Jackets power forward even knew which NHL rule to cite, but no argument was needed, and he was awarded the final goal in a 3-0 victory over the New Jersey Devils on Feb. 3 at Prudential Center.

Olivier was credited with his second goal of the game, eighth of the season, after out-hustling Dougie Hamilton to a loose puck and drawing a slash from the Devils defenseman with New Jersey's net empty.

Per NHL Rule 25.1: "A goal will be awarded to the attacking team when the opposing team has taken their goalkeeper off the ice and an attacking player has possession and control of the puck (or would have gained possession and control) in the neutral or attacking zone, without a defending player between himself and the opposing goal, and he is prevented from scoring as a result of an infraction committed by the defending team."

Olivier spotted the loose puck sliding back toward the Devils' end with Hamilton sauntering back to get it. He turned it into a race and won it. Hamilton slashed Olivier in response.

Olivier immediately turned to look for the official's signal and was pleased to see referee Liam Maaskant award the goal.

"I was actually expecting him not to give it," Olivier told reporters at Prudential Center. "I was ready to argue, but my stick was broken. So, I knew that according to the rule, it's supposed to be a goal."

Rather than an elaborate celebration, Olivier simply grabbed his stick and finished the job by snapping it into two pieces with a smile. His first goal of the night, scored with a nice forehand-backhand off a breakaway, had brought an even bigger smile. After all, it had given the Blue Jackets a 2-0 lead with 7:55 left to play in a defensive struggle.

Olivier's two-goal performance was his second of the season and fourth in his NHL career. He has also notched two points in three of the past four games for six points on four goals and two assists. Olivier's scoring line of 8-9-17 in 42 games puts him on pace for 13-15-28 in his first season on a six-year contract he signed last year to remain with the Blue Jackets.

That's behind his career-high scoring pace of 18-14-32 last season, but Olivier has missed 13 games with injuries this season and his scoring touch is starting to return while skating with center Charlie Coyle and Cole Sillinger on the third line.

And now he's got a rare, NHL-awarded goal to his credit.

The Columbus Dispatch / Shutout gives Columbus Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins Olympic boost

By Brian Hedger – February 4, 2026

Elvis Merzlikins can almost devote his full attention to the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina, Italy.

First, the goalie must watch teammate Jet Greaves backstop the Blue Jackets into the league's Olympics break. Columbus will be looking to defeat the Chicago Blackhawks on Feb. 4 at Nationwide Arena for their seventh straight win.

Merzlikins handled the Blue Jackets' net during the team's sixth in a row, that victory coming Feb. 3 at Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, where he made 24 saves for his first shutout of the season and 12th of his career.

Barring injury or illness preventing Greaves from playing against Chicago, Merzlikins' next game will be for Latvia in Milan, Italy. It's an opportunity he's dreamed about for a long time.

"Obviously, I'm getting ready for [the] Olympics now," Merzlikins said on the FanDuel Sports Network's postgame show. "It was hard today because I already was ... mentally, I was one foot that was already there, but I had to dial into this game and win these points because they are really important for us."

The Blue Jackets (28-20-7) improved to 10-1-0 in their past 11 games, 9-1-10 since coach Rick Bowness replaced Dean Evason and have clawed their way back into the playoff picture in the Eastern Conference. Merzlikins and Greaves are playing key roles in the turnaround, along with a team more dedicated to reducing goals allowed.

The Jackets hunt pucks with more consistency and intensity now, erase shooting lanes from areas where most goals are scored and put themselves in harm's way to help their goalies. Adam Fantilli showed that dedication by blocking a shot in the waning seconds against the Devils to notch the shutout, risking injury with a three-goal lead.

Merzlikins thanked him, effusively, for doing it.

Four years earlier, in the same building, a different Blue Jackets group with some of the same players preceded a trip to Helsinki, Finland, by hanging Merzlikins out to dry in a 7-1 loss to the Devils, who outshot them by a whopping 53-21.

That was as ugly as it gets in the NHL and former coach Brad Larsen held a lengthy postgame team meeting before reporters were allowed into the locker room. What a difference four years and four additional head coaches can make, huh?

Speaking of coaches, Merzlikins got a hug from Bowness in the locker room celebration, was given the team's player of the game donkey hat that honors Johnny Gaudreau's memory and can now, almost, fully cast his attention to the Olympics.

“Obviously, it’s exciting,” Merzlikins said. “It’s a huge honor to play for your country, and especially to see the boys [for Latvia]. There [are] most of the guys who I grew up playing hockey [with], since I was 15, you know? ... I keep watching on Instagram the [Olympic] village and all the accounts of other countries, so I’m super excited and pumped. I can’t wait to go.”

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Gameday News & Notes: Bowness, Lundestrom, Foligno & More

By Mark Scheig – February 4, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets are ready to attack their last game before the Olympic break. They get a return date with the Chicago Blackhawks on Wednesday night at Nationwide Arena. With a win, the Blue Jackets would go into the break with a 10-1 record since head coach Rick Bowness took over.

The Blue Jackets are coming off a big 3-0 win over the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday night. Mathieu Olivier scored twice while Elvis Merzlikins pitched a 23-save shutout. Dante Fabbro scored the game-winning goal in his return to the lineup.

We begin this edition of News and Notes by talking about the state of the defense. With Fabbro back, the Blue Jackets have eight defensemen available to play. How will Bowness handle that?

Six Defensemen Set For Now

The Blue Jackets will eventually need their depth on defense especially when injuries come up. But for now, the team has their top-six clearly identified in the sight of Bowness.

The six defensemen who played Tuesday night are the Blue Jackets' top-six, Bowness confirmed.

"We consider top-six playing to be our top-six guys," Bowness said. "So when you have that, then you have to make an adjustment. (Fabbro) played left side last night. He looked fine. Would we prefer three right, three lefties? Yeah, but it's the way that the team is structured, the way that the D is built. The best look we can throw out is what we threw out last night."

"Now that being said, could there be changes down the road? Absolutely. But we really liked what we saw last night and we'll continue with that until we don't."

This will mean Jake Christiansen and Egor Zamula will have to wait their turn to play. With the Olympic break coming up, they'll have to wait an extended period of time until they see the ice again in a game. Just takes one change to have them in. But this will be worth watching as the Blue Jackets go into the grind of a playoff race to see how this play out.

Werenski's Ice Time

Another thing Bowness talked about on Wednesday morning was Zach Werenski's ice time being reduced somewhat especially in back-to-back games. The head coach confirmed this was an intentional move to try to keep the defenseman fresher. Here is what was said about that.

"Especially the night before. (They) did a good job last night of keeping him under 23 minutes and I talked to Zach about that. We'd prefer to be down in that range. He's going to be more effective. He's not going to be tired. The 22-23 minutes is ideal for him. Now, that being said, if the game's on the line and we need him to play 27, we know he can respond to that. But we don't want to get into 20 minutes

after two periods so we're trying to avoid it. So if we need him for those six of the last 10 minutes, he's able to give us those minutes."

Werenski has consistently been among the NHL leaders in ice time over the recent past. In the heat of a playoff race, Bowness has identified an opportunity to limit Werenski's minutes some so he can be fresh and available when the need arises.

Lundestrom Trusted by Bowness

Saturday in St. Louis, Bowness talked about how much he liked what Isac Lundestrom brought to the team. The coach appreciated the role Lundestrom plays acting as a "10th man" being able to play all over the lineup.

Lundestrom says he tries to be the same player he's always been but acknowledges it's fun to hear Bowness talk him up.

"I've always been the same player," Lundestrom said. "I want to probably not do the most points and everything like that. But I want to get every detail right and try to be good defensively. I want to be trusted out there (so) they can put me in different situations. It's always fun to hear."

Lundestrom is a defensive first player. He won't cheat the game. He plays in a way where he tries to stay on the right side of the puck. But he thinks he can add offensively too. He scored a goal Saturday night to get the Blue Jackets on the board.

"When I played at home in Sweden, I think I was a little bit more of an offensive player," Lundestrom said. "At the same time, I want to be responsible defensively. First, I try to keep the puck and not throw it away. I think I'm pretty solid at protecting the puck and I skate pretty good. I think I could definitely use that (part of my game) a little bit more."

Lundestrom started on the top line Tuesday night but finished on the fourth line with Boone Jenner and Miles Wood. He explains why that is an effective line.

"They think the same way," Lundestrom said of his linemates. "They're both good skaters and play a simple game. We understand each other."

Lundestrom will be on the fourth line most nights but if the need for a shake up arises, Bowness has said he will put Lundestrom in different spots in the lineup. He seems to be getting more comfortable with each passing day.

Same Old Foligno in Chicago

Anyone that's followed Nick Foligno's career knows that lately, he's been a mentor given his veteran status. He's been instrumental in helping the likes of Connor Bedard and others get comfortable in the NHL.

Blackhawks coach Jeff Blashill opened up on Wednesday about what all Foligno has meant to the room. He will return to the lineup on Wednesday to play against his former team.

“He brings unreal perspective,” Blashill said. “Obviously been in the league a long time, been around the game forever. I think he’s an excellent leader. I think he’s done a great job being, I’ve asked him to be kind of a papa bear with our young players to help them in their growth. I think he does a good job of being an extension of the coaching staff in a lot of different ways. He’s been an important player for us as well. I can’t say enough good things about him as a human being number one and then as a leader. He’s done an excellent job.”

Foligno hosted the Blackhawks at his house in Columbus for a get together on Tuesday. He continues to do everything he can to mentor the next wave of players on his team. That part of him has never changed no matter what jersey he’s put on.

Side Dishes

- Jet Greaves will start against the Blackhawks on Wednesday night. With a win, he’d improve to a perfect 5-0-0 under Bowness.
- Kirill Marchenko skated this morning. Bowness said his status would be determined based on that. We’ll see at warmups for sure, but all indications point to Marchenko playing against the Blackhawks.
- The Blue Jackets will have an Olympic sendoff for both Werenski and Elvis Merzlikins as part of the festivities on Wednesday night.