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## **Columbus Dispatch / After three seasons, Philadelphia Flyers fire former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella**

**By Adam Jardy – March 28, 2025**

John Tortorella has been fired by the Philadelphia Flyers after three seasons as head coach.

Tortorella previously coached the Columbus Blue Jackets for six seasons, leading them to four playoff appearances.

He is the winningest coach in Blue Jackets history with a record of 277-166.

Former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella has been fired by the Philadelphia Flyers.

Tortorella had nine games remaining in his third season with the club. A Stanley Cup champion with Tampa Bay in 2004, Tortorella has had five full-time NHL head coaching jobs including a six-year run with the Blue Jackets from 2015 through a late-season parting of ways in 2021.

"Today I made the very difficult decision to move on from John as our head coach," Flyers general manager Daniel Briere said in a statement. "John played a vital role in our rebuild. He set a standard of play and re-established what it means to be a Philadelphia Flyer. John's passion on the bench was only equaled by his charitable work in our community. As we move into the next chapter of this rebuild, I felt this was the best for our team to move forward. I'd like to thank John for his tireless work and commitment to the Flyers."

Philadelphia has lost six straight and 11 of its last 12 games to fall to 28-36-9, the worst record in the Metropolitan Division.

In 2019, Tortorella led the Blue Jackets to their first Stanley Cup playoff series win when they swept his former club, the Lightning, in a stunning first-round upset. The Jackets went on to lose to Boston 4-2 in the next round. Under Tortorella, Columbus reached the playoffs in four consecutive seasons: without him, the Blue Jackets have made the postseason only twice.

Tortorella went 97-107-33 with the Flyers since the start of the 2022-23 season. He's amassed a career record of 770-648-37 that also includes stops with the New York Rangers, Lightning, and Vancouver Canucks. He went 277-166 with the Blue Jackets and is the winningest coach in club history.

He is being replaced on an interim basis by associate head coach Brad Shaw, who was also with him in Columbus.

## **Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets playoff tracker: Odds nearly double after edging New York Islanders**

**By Brian Hedger – March 28, 2025**

After ending a six-game winless skid Monday with a thrilling 4-3 shootout win over the New York Islanders at UBS Arena, the Blue Jackets breathed new life into their playoff chances with 12 games left.

Their odds of qualifying for a playoff spot might've plummeted since March 1, when the Jackets seized control of the first wild card in the Eastern Conference with a win over the Detroit Red Wings at Ohio Stadium, but they've nearly doubled since Monday.

MoneyPuck, DraftKings and FanDuel have adjusted percentages and betting odds in the Blue Jackets' favor following the victory over the Islanders followed by losses Tuesday and Wednesday by their closest competitors for the East's second wild card.

Prior to that victory, which required the Blue Jackets get the game to overtime on a controversial goaltender interference call, they'd won just one of nine games following the NHL Stadium Series victory. Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson returned to the lineup against the Isles following long-term injuries, and the Blue Jackets have two more lineup pieces — center Cole Sillinger and defenseman Jake Christiansen — ready to return if called upon Friday against the Vancouver Canucks.

They'll help Blue Jackets (32-29-9, 73 points) match up against the Canucks, who did them a huge favor with a 5-2 victory against the Islanders on Wednesday in New York. The Canucks (34-26-12, 80 points) are chasing the second wild-card spot in the Western Conference, three points behind the St. Louis Blues and five points back of the Minnesota Wild for the first wild card.

It's also a tight race in the East, where Columbus is among a five-team race for the second wild-card spot that includes the Red Wings (33-32-6, 72 points), Blue Jackets (32-29-9, 73 points), New York Rangers (34-32-6, 74 points), Islanders (32-29-10, 74 points) and Montreal Canadiens (33-28-9), who currently control the conference's coveted final playoff slot.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' odds of qualifying for the playoffs drop again**

The Athletic used a predictive stat-based model in October to project the Blue Jackets with a 0.3% chance of qualifying for the playoffs and finishing with 69 points — 68.6 to be exact. Going into a back-to-back set against the Canucks on Friday and Ottawa Senators on Saturday in Kanata, Ontario, the Jackets have already exceeded those expectations with 73 points in 70 games to remain in the playoff hunt.

That's the bright side. Those who forecast NHL games and generate betting odds have a more pessimistic outlook, but it has also improved since the Jackets' win Monday.

DraftKings and BetMGM now list the Jackets' odds of qualifying for the postseason at +350 to make it, a jump from +600 before Monday's victory, and -450 to miss. That second number was -900 to miss starting the week. FanDuel started the week with +680 for Columbus to qualify and -1400 to miss, which has since improved to +350 to make it and -520 to miss out.

According to MoneyPuck, which uses percentages, the Blue Jackets' win in New York upped their odds of qualifying for the playoff from 6.3% Monday to 13.8% waking up for practice Thursday. They increased their chance of earning the Eastern Conference's second wild-card spot from 4.5% to 10.5%, while improving their chances from 0.6% to 1.6% of landing the East's first wild card.

The Blue Jackets' chances of finishing third in the Metropolitan Division also increased from 1.1% Monday to 1.7% Thursday.

### **How does the NHL determine its opening playoff field?**

**Conference standings:** The top eight teams in the NHL's Eastern and Western conferences earn playoff spots. The Blue Jackets are likely vying for the East's second wild card.

**Playoff cutoff:** The cutoff mark going into games Thursday is 75 points for the Canadiens, who currently reside in that wild-card spot with the same number of games remaining (12) as Columbus. The Blue Jackets are 11th in the conference at 73 points, and the Islanders, Rangers and Canadiens all hold standings tiebreakers over them in regulation wins. Columbus is also being pursued by the Red Wings (72 points), Boston Bruins (69 points) and Penguins (69 points).

### **Columbus Blue Jackets playoff outlook**

**Remaining points possible:** The Blue Jackets can earn up to 24 more points in their remaining 12 games. Using their .521 points percentage, their season total would climb to 85 points at the end of an 82-game season.

That's probably not enough to earn a playoff spot, but it's possible given the logjam of teams so closely grouped while chasing the East's second wild card. The Jackets probably need 90-plus points, which they can reach by igniting a hot streak.

### **Here is how the Columbus Blue Jackets have fared recently**

**Last 10 Games:** The Blue Jackets are 2-7-1 in their last 10 games.

**Notable wins/losses:** Winning four straight games after the NHL's pause for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February was a high point that included the Jackets' exciting 5-3 victory over the Red Wings at Ohio Stadium. They also looked great routing the New York Rangers 7-3 on March 9 at Madison Square Garden in New York and got a needed boost Monday against the Isles.

Dropping consecutive games to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers to open a four-game trip that followed the March 1 outdoor win over Detroit began a troubling stretch where they lost eight of nine that included six straight defeats prior to edging the Islanders.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets upcoming schedule**

**Here are the Blue Jackets' remaining games in March with start time and TV/radio broadcast information:**

**Friday, March 28** — Vancouver Canucks (29-24-11), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

**Saturday, March 29** — At Ottawa Senators (34-25-5), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

### **Columbus Blue Jackets home/road splits**

The Blue Jackets have struggled all season on the road. Their splits between home and road games are striking, and they've dropped their past four in a row at home:

**Home Record: 20-9-5 (45 points)**

**Away Record: 12-20-4 (28 points)**

**Summary:** Teams that make the playoffs almost always break even on the road and make hay at home. The Blue Jackets had the home success part before their current skid, but haven't fully shaken their road woes.

## **Columbus Blue Jackets key players**

### **The top scoring leaders for the Blue Jackets are:**

D Zach Werenski — 20 goals, 49 assists, 69 points

RW Kirill Marchenko — 26 goals, 37 assists, 63 points

F Kent Johnson — 22 goals, 24 assists, 46 points

C Adam Fantilli — 22 goals, 21 assists, 43 point

C Sean Monahan — 14 goals, 29 assists, 43 points

LW Dmitri Voronkov — 20 goals, 22 assists, 42 points

**Breakdown:** These six are critical to the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes, and Monahan's two-assist return from injury Monday against the Islanders was a welcome sight. The Jackets are still missing Sillinger, but he could play Friday for the first time since injuring a shoulder Feb. 28 in Detroit.

### **Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' top goalies:**

**No. 1 starter** — Elvis Merzlikins is 23-19-5 with a 3.03 goals against average (GAA), .896 save percentage (SV%) and one shutout.

**Backup** — Danill Tarasov is 7-8-2 with a 3.51 GAA, .882 SV% and one shutout.

**Breakdown:** After struggling with consistency, Merzlikins has provided solid goaltending. He was the main reason the Blue Jackets took a game against the Florida Panthers last week to overtime tied 0-0 prior to a 1-0 OT loss, and Merzlikins was solid against the Islanders too. Tarasov has also rebounded from a slump in the season's first half to provide a dependable backup option.

## Columbus Dispatch / Sillinger, Christiansen cleared as Columbus Blue Jackets finally regain health

**By Brian Hedger – March 28, 2025**

The Blue Jackets' injury report is finally down to a number that put a smile on coach Dean Evason's face Wednesday after an optional practice at Nationwide Arena.

After hearing a reporter's comment about not having many injuries left, Evason quipped: "How about zero?"

Technically, the number of injured Blue Jackets isn't down to zero and won't be due to forward Kevin Labanc's season-ending shoulder surgery. The number of injuries to players who could still play, however, is now a goose egg.

Evason said forward Cole Sillinger (shoulder) and defenseman Jake Christiansen (upper body) are medically cleared to play Friday against the Vancouver Canucks. That means the coaching staff has a full roster of 25 players — 14 forwards, nine defensemen and two goalies — to pick from.

While that's refreshing news for an injury-plagued team, it also creates a puzzle for the Blue Jackets' coaching staff to solve during the team's 12-game push for a playoff spot in a tight Eastern Conference race.

"It's great, but it is challenging to try to figure out the balance of who plays well together, but also there's an element of the room ... the chemistry, all that kind of stuff," Evason said. "But I'll tell you this, it's nice for us that we feel very comfortable that whatever decisions we make, the team's just going to go play. We haven't had a group here that's disrupted when they've sat out or they're not playing."

Should Sillinger and/or Christiansen play Friday, it'll be interesting to see which players from the Jackets' 4-3 shootout victory Monday at the New York Islanders sit. Yegor Chinakhov, a winger who started the season with a regular role, was among those scratched Monday.

Christian Fischer, a power forward, was also scratched along with three defensemen — Christiansen, Jack Johnson and Jordan Harris. Sillinger will need to be activated off injured reserve prior to his return.

James van Riemsdyk, Zach Aston-Reese and recently acquired forward Luke Kunin might be removed from the lineup to make room for Sillinger, while finding a spot for Christiansen could be tougher among the six defensemen who played Monday in New York.

Erik Gudbranson, an experienced veteran with a right-handed shot, returned from October shoulder surgery in that game and his partner, lefty Denton Mateychuk, appears to have a regular lineup spot.

Damon Severson was a healthy scratch for a few games earlier this season, but he and Ivan Provorov were statistically one of the Jackets' best pairs against the Islanders. No matter who sits, the Jackets now have a stacked competition for lineup spots, and that's without including center Jack Williams, a college free agent who signed this week out of Northeastern.

"I think it's a credit to our leadership group that they are the ones that are driving that (understanding) into our team and leading in that department," Evason said.

## The Athletic / How the Blue Jackets landed a 'main target' college free agent, who headed straight to the NHL

By Aaron Portzline – March 28, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets have made a flurry of contract signings over the last three days, signing two of their own recent draft picks to entry-level contracts and dipping into the college free-agent market to sign two others.

Only one of those players is coming straight to the NHL, with an outside chance of playing for the Blue Jackets before the season ends.

Center Jack Williams, who just completed his third season at Northeastern University near Boston, signed a two-year entry-level contract on Tuesday and is expected to travel to Columbus on Thursday afternoon. His first time on the ice with his new teammates will likely be Friday's optional morning skate before the Jackets host Vancouver in Nationwide Arena.

"We've been tracking him for over a year now," Blue Jackets director of hockey operations Rick Nash said. "He's been our main target — or one of our main targets (among college free agents) — all year, so getting him signed was really rewarding."

"Jack is a right-handed center. He's good in every situation. Good on the (faceoff) dot. A very detailed player in every zone. And every check we did along the way, through all of the places he's played, his character was just off the charts. He's a guy we feel could be a Blue Jacket for a long time."

The Blue Jackets signed another college free agent on Wednesday, adding stout and sturdy defenseman Caleb MacDonald from the University of North Dakota on a two-year entry-level contract that begins next season. He suffered an injury in his final college game, general manager Don Waddell said, and is expected to miss four weeks.

The Jackets signed forward Luca Pinelli, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2023, to a three-year entry-level contract this week and loaned him to AHL Cleveland.

They also signed defenseman Charlie Elick, a second-round pick (No. 36 overall) last June, to a three-year entry-level deal. He remains with his junior club, Tri-City of the Western Hockey League, but could join AHL Cleveland if his playoff run ends early enough.

### **Cap's Columbus Bound!**

It's Williams, however, who is — for now — closest to playing for the Blue Jackets. After Wednesday's practice, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said Williams would be treated like any other player.

"We'll see through practice whether he plays or doesn't," Evason said.

Often, when NHL teams try to entice college free agents to sign, they'll promise them a certain number of NHL games before the end of the season. But, according to Waddell and Peter Fish, Williams' agent, no such promises were made.

The Blue Jackets, after all, are in a playoff race in the Eastern Conference.

"I've said it my whole career, that everything has to be earned, not given," Williams told The Athletic on Wednesday. "If you look at my career, that's the way I've been brought up. I've earned everything to get where I am, and I wouldn't expect anything to change."

"I'm there to give (the Blue Jackets) whatever they need. If they need a penalty-killer in practice, or whatever it is, anything I can do to hopefully get this team into the playoffs, I'm willing to do."

Williams played in 106 games at Northeastern, totaling 39 goals and 55 assists. He had 16 goals and 25 assists in 37 games this season, when he served as the club's captain.

Fish said 15 NHL clubs expressed interest in Williams in recent weeks, but he and Williams trimmed the list to five clubs before getting serious.

"We had to separate the teams that were just looking to add an asset, versus the teams that were really serious, were good fits and had tremendous interest," Fish said.

"A lot of teams cast a wide net for college free agents. The Blue Jackets target very specifically. They see somebody they want and they're genuine. They fish with a spear. That's what they did here, and that's what made Jack feel very comfortable signing there."

Williams said there was one pivotal day in the Blue Jackets' recruitment of him. Nash and Chris Clark, the Blue Jackets' director of player personnel, took him to lunch at the Pressed Club, a cafe less than a mile from the Northeastern campus.

"I really enjoyed them both," Williams said. "They're unbelievable people. They had great careers, obviously, but it was just a good conversation."

"I'm not a kid that likes massive cities. I grew up in (Biddeford) Maine. Just listening to everything they said about living and playing in Columbus, it sounded like a place I wanted to be."

Williams said he heard from Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski immediately after his signing. And there are two other Northeastern products in the dressing room: forward Zach Aston-Reese and defenseman Jordan Harris.

This month, Aston-Reese was asked by Northeastern coaches to speak with this year's club via video conferencing before they started the postseason.

Otherwise, stepping into the Blue Jackets' dressing room is going to feel like the first day at a new school for Williams, who turned 23 on March 2.

Fish, who represented Clark during his playing days and also represents former Blue Jackets winger Oliver Bjorkstrand (now with Tampa Bay), said he can't wait to see what Williams becomes in the NHL.

"I've been doing this for 25 years, and this is a special kid," Fish said. "He's one of the best kids I've ever represented. He's a winner. He's a throwback as a teammate. These days, there are kids who, all they care about are points, to the extent that they're competing with kids on their own team, getting pissed off when the other guy scores."

"Jack is not that guy. Not at all. He wants to win so badly. He's the happiest on the team when other people score or get points. He's team-first all the way, a 200-foot player. He plays on the right side of the puck, and I know there are guys in Columbus who appreciate stuff like that."



## **BlueJackets.com / Girls hockey is taking off in Columbus**

**By Jeff Svoboda – March 28, 2025**

Gabbi Franklin remembers the moment she decided she wanted to play hockey.

The Pickerington native is now a member of the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets 14U girls team that is headed to nationals, but a few years ago, she was just a kid enjoying a Blue Jackets game at Nationwide Arena when inspiration struck.

“It’s kind of funny because we were here,” she said after working as a coach at the Blue Jackets Girls Hockey Day presented by Bread Financial on the arena’s main ice March 15. “My dad brought me to a Blue Jackets game, and I remember my words. I said, ‘I want to be out there some day. I want to be out there,’ so that’s how it started.”

Two Saturdays ago, Franklin was out there, helping girls learn to play the game she loves and serving as an inspiration to the 65 youngsters who one day hope to lace up the skates and achieve great things just like her.

The stages will hopefully keep getting bigger for both Franklin and girls hockey in Columbus, which is thriving in a way that portends an even greater future. There are so many ways to quantify the growth of the game both here and in general, starting at the pro level, where the success of the Professional Women’s Hockey League has shown the appetite for high-level women’s hockey is stronger than ever.

In Columbus, that shows itself in many ways. The Ohio State women’s hockey program has won two of the last four national championships, participated in five straight Frozen Fours and consistently graduated players to their national teams, including the Olympic Games. Just three years into its existence, the AAA program is sending a team to nationals for the first time to compete against the best in the country.

And perhaps best of all, participation in girls hockey has started to skyrocket. In 2016-17, 42 girls were registered in the Blue Jackets Learn To Play on-ice program for kids aged 4-10; in 2023-24, that number was up to 353. Likewise, girls registration in the organization’s Get Out and Learn clinics for ages 5 to 9 has risen from 120 in 2017-18 to 377 in 2023-24. And this season, 257 girls are participating in the Blue Jackets Hockey League, up from 67 two years ago.

The numbers are similar when it comes to USA Hockey participation. During the 2018-19 season, 302 girls age 18 or under were registered to play in Central Ohio; that number was up to 674 for the 2023-24 season. The vast majority of those girls – 606 – are 14 and under, providing a backbone for what should be a very exciting future.

“It’s grown a lot,” said Leslie Walker, a longtime coach who is vice president and hockey director for Central Ohio Girls Hockey. “It’s quite astounding when I look back where we came from. It’s just amazing to be part of it.”

### **AAA Program Competes at a High Level**

Led by head coach Mike Darr, the AAA Blue Jackets 14U girls team went to Pittsburgh in early March to face the established Pens Elite program for the Mid-Am regional title. A bid at nationals was on the line, and the team hit the road intent on carrying the flag, so to speak, to represent the city and show how far it’s come.

“Coach told us he wanted us to show everyone else what girls hockey was about in Columbus,” Franklin said. “So that’s what we did.”

The teams were tied 3-3 through two periods, but three straight goals – two from Ellie Maksim – allowed the AAA Blue Jackets to earn a 6-4 victory. With the win, the squad has advanced to USA Hockey nationals, which will take place starting next week in Marlborough, Mass., outside Boston.

Considering the program is in just its third season, Darr didn’t shy away from what the impact of such success might mean going forward.

“It’s definitely a monumental point in the growth of girls hockey, and it’s going to be a huge milestone to build off of and see what happens next,” Darr said.

The AAA Blue Jackets first started a girls program in the 2010s only to have to stop sponsoring the teams for a couple of years because the numbers weren’t sustainable.

But given the recent rise in participation and the interest in the community, the time was right two seasons ago to give it another shot. The AAA team started with one age group – a 14U team for the 2008 and ‘09 birth years – and has since expanded to teams at the 16U and 12U level.

One thing that has stood out to Darr is the camaraderie that’s been built so quickly inside the organization, as well as the commitment to growing the game that’s come about.

“The one thing I preach to the girls is that you’re not just doing it for yourself,” Darr said. “You’re doing it for the girls coming up and giving them something to look up to. It’s not the name on the back; it’s that emblem on the front. No matter where you play, that’s what really matters, that you’re playing for the person next to you.

“The big thing that we learn as coaches in watching programs grow is how much these girls work for each other and want to be good role models for the girls coming up.”

The AAA Blue Jackets program is headed by girls hockey director Kerry Bowman, who now coaches the 16U team and was head coach of the 14U team its first season. Bowman’s goal when he arrived was to build a program with an eye on long-term success, which has come perhaps sooner than even he imagined.

“I’d be lying if I said I thought we’d already be having a team going to nationals in year three, but it’s a credit to that team and those players and those girls,” Bowman said. “We definitely didn’t think it was a shock or anything like that. We felt we had a good chance with the way it was structured. We felt confident in our group, and they delivered.”

Darr’s assistant coach, Marty Laroche, is a longtime coach for the AAA Blue Jackets who worked on the boys side as the program grew in the late 2000s and early 2010s. At that time, such names as Connor Murphy, Sean Kuraly and Jack Roslovic came through the program and would go on to become regulars at the NHL level.

Laroche said he sees similarities in the growth of girls hockey now to what he saw on the boys side years ago. That’s music to Bowman’s ears, especially as opportunities continue to grow at the college and professional levels.

“I’m just excited,” Bowman said. “You look at the boys program churning out players that are going D-I, they’re playing pro, they’re playing at the NHL level, and obviously we’ve been spoiled having multiple of them playing for the Blue Jackets.

“You look down the road and you’re looking at hopefully our program is in a position where we’re sending girls to D-I and we have girls that are potentially going to be playing in the PWWHL and maybe representing their country at the national stage. That’s the end goal for our program.”

### **It Takes a Village**

One thing that’s been proved consistently in the development of young hockey players is it takes an entire community to help them to thrive.

In Columbus, that infrastructure has grown through the decades on the boys side, and the fruits of those labors are being seen in increased participation, the success of the AAA team and the number of players who have reached the college and pro levels.

As the girls side starts to see the same success, one area Darr pointed to is the grassroots level. Without the efforts of the Blue Jackets introducing kids to the game through Learn To Play and Get Out and Learn as well as Central Ohio Girls Hockey, the success would be much harder to come by.

“I would say one of the main reasons it’s growing is really the grassroots,” Darr said. “When we started the (10U) program eight years ago with Central Ohio Girls Hockey, this team that is now with the Ohio Blue Jackets was basically the first 10U team we had back then. Those birth years been playing together the past four or five years. It just shows you the growth, when they start young and start playing together, how much they bond together.”

Walker described Central Ohio Girls Hockey as an “uber organization” that helps attract and keep girls in the sport. Much of the focus is on helping younger girls in the age 6 to 14 age bracket get into the game and stay, providing a base of participation that trickles up as time goes on.

“We dedicate ourselves to the bottom (of the triangle), helping them get on the ice, get skilled, get equipment, get training and prepare them to compete or try out for teams, join house leagues, join the Blue Jackets Learn To Play program, then filter into the Blue Jackets Hockey League and be able to have the skill, the love of it and enjoyment of it,” Walker said. “That’s our focus.”

There are number of other organizations in Columbus that sponsor girls hockey, including the Columbus Chill Youth Hockey Association, which has supported programs since 2006. This upcoming season, the CCHYA plans to sponsor travel teams in the 10U, 12U, 14U, 16U and 19U age brackets.

Then there’s the Columbus Ice Hockey Club, which started in 1999. One of 39 NHL Hockey is For Everyone programs, the CIHC serves more than 3,000 youth per year, with more than 65 percent of their participants being minority and more than 30 percent female. The organization offers U14, U16 and U19 girls teams, the chance to play at the JV level for high school girls, and opportunities for younger girls to step on the ice for the first time.

During the NHL Stadium Series festivities last month, the NHL, Blue Jackets, ESPN and Ohio State hosted a series of events that included a VIP screening of Disney/Pixar’s Inside Out 2 with nearly 100 girls and boys from OSU’s LiFEsports program and the CIHC. The week also included multiple Learn to Skate and Learn to Play clinics with NHL Foundation U.S. ambassador and Olympic gold medalist Haley Skarupa.

The day before the game, the Columbus Ice Hockey Club was announced as the inaugural recipient of the Empowerment Grant for Girls Hockey from the NHL Foundation U.S.

“What it does is it helps us knock down some of the hurdles that we have,” said John Haferman, the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department’s liaison to the CIHC. “You cannot get better unless you work on the skills. What it’s going to do is allow us to do is be on the ice more for development

purposes. We're going to be able to run several more skates. The more practice you do, the better you get."

The Columbus Ice Hockey Club has a long-term relationship with both the Blue Jackets Foundation and the NHL. Kim Davis, the league's senior vice president for social impact, growth initiatives and legislative affairs, said it's one of the most respected programs across the country when it comes to providing opportunities for players to get on the ice.

"The model here is really the model of all of our youth programs across the country," Davis said. "I often hear people talk about what are some of the best youth programs in the community at removing barriers and providing access, and John Haferman and the Columbus program always comes up as an example."

### **Building a Brighter Future**

While Haferman always has an eye on the future, he never stops thinking about those who have helped the Columbus Ice Hockey Club become what it is. The club has stayed close to its alumni over the years, and many of them were in attendance for the events leading up to the Stadium Series that celebrated girls hockey.

"The thing that really struck a chord with me was being in the room, we had probably 24 or 25 girls that came out of our program that are now young adults that are successful," Haferman said. "It was a really melancholy moment. I'm sitting here in this room thinking, I knew them when they were little girls and lacked confidence and didn't really know what they wanted to do, and now here they are in this room being acknowledged. That was a really cool thing for them to be able to do."

If you talk to anyone involved in the community, one of the things that comes up is how big of an impact hockey can have on girls. From building confidence to learning how to battle adversity to the social aspect of being teammates and friends with other girls, hockey teaches as much away from the ice as it does on it, and Walker has seen it firsthand.

Her daughter, Brienne, started at a young age because her brother was playing. As she got better on the ice, she translated those skills off of it, eventually attending the Air Force Academy and graduating in 2019. Now, she is an Air Force captain who flies KC135 refueling jets.

"I always point to her when I'm talking with families," Walker said. "She tried out, got to be pretty good at it, grew, gained confidence, and decided after high school that she wanted to go to the Air Force Academy, so she competed against all of Ohio for two spots and got one."

"She went into the Air Force Academy, did well out there, went into pilot training, and she's now an Air Force pilot. She will tell you it's because she got the confidence, the ability to compete, the teamwork, all of the things that sports and hockey gives, and that's part of the reason she is where she is now."

Another piece of the puzzle is the mentorship and community aspect. Darr said one of the big things he tries to do is take his teams to Ohio State to see some of the best players in the country, and the Buckeyes women's team is often active with the youth organizations. It's all about showing what's possible to the younger kids, who get an up-close look at their heroes.

Blake Bolden grew up in the Cleveland area, went on to star at Boston College, played professionally and is now a scout for the Los Angeles Kings as well as a broadcaster. As she's seen opportunities for girls to play in her home state grow, she's also tried to give back to grow the game.

"The boulder is rolling downhill, and there's just been such great ambassadors for the game," Bolden said. "I think we've done a great job of loving the sport that we grew up playing and wanting to see it on

a big platform, and now we're seeing it. We have a pro league, we have a beautiful rivalry series, and we have stadiums filled up watching the best women in the world play. Now, little girls can look up and become professional hockey players and play at some of the best universities in the nation."

For Franklin, that means going from playing with boys growing up to already being a role model when she helped teach the game to the next generation at Girls Hockey Day. The future could be even brighter as the game grows and grows, both for Franklin and the girls she mentored.

"It's amazing," Franklin said. "When I started, there was nothing. It was all about boys, and now, it's just amazing to see all of the girls developing and learning."

## The Hockey News / Scoreboard Watch For Thursday, March 27

By Jason Newland – March 28, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets haven't had to scoreboard-watch in March and April in a few years, but here we are.

Going into Thursday's games, the CBJ sits with 73 points, two points behind the Montréal Canadiens for the second wild card. Columbus is also six points behind the Ottawa Senators for the first wild card. As a reminder, the CBJ and Sens play three times in less than two weeks. So, if the Jackets can win some games, well, anything can happen.

### **Tonight's Games That Matter:**

**Ottawa Senators(79) vs. Detroit Red Wings(72)** - Ottawa holds the first wild card spot, while the Red Wings sit just one point behind the CBJ. This one is tricky, but I'd rather have the Senators win this one.

**Montréal Canadiens(75) vs Philadelphia Flyers(65)** - The Flyers are out of the mix but may get a boost tonight. It was announced on Thursday that the Flyers fired HC John Tortorella, so will they get a quick coach change bump? Columbus fans will be rooting hard for the Flyers tonight.

**Pittsburgh Penguins(69) vs. Buffalo Sabres(64)** - Many people think the Pens are out of it, but don't count them out just yet. If you think Sidney Crosby is just going to let his team go down without a fight, you haven't been watching. There's still an outside shot for the Penguins, but Columbus (as usual) will be rooting hard against Pittsburgh on Thursday.

**Up Next:** The Vancouver Canucks visit Columbus on Friday.

## The Hockey News / Looking Ahead At The Blue Jackets' Upcoming Schedule

**By Spencer Lazary – March 28, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets are in one of the tightest wild card races we've seen in years.

As of March 27, 2025, five teams are battling for the final wild card spot in the Eastern Conference. To make things even more interesting, there's still a mathematical chance that any of those teams could catch the Ottawa Senators for the first wild card position.

With teams having between nine and 11 games remaining in the 2024-25 NHL season, fans should buckle up—these next few weeks are going to be intense.

For the Blue Jackets, 12 games remain, and they sit just two points behind the Montreal Canadiens for WC2 and six points back of the Senators for WC1. With the playoffs less than a month away, it's the perfect time to break down their remaining schedule and the key matchups ahead.

### **Blue Jackets Schedule:**

Friday March 28: vs. Vancouver Canucks

Saturday March 29: @ Ottawa Senators

Tuesday April 1: vs. Nashville Predators

Thursday April 3: vs. Colorado Avalanche

Saturday April 5: @ Toronto Maple Leafs

Sunday April 6: @ Ottawa Senators

Tuesday April 8: vs. Ottawa Senators

Thursday April 10: vs. Buffalo Sabres

Saturday April 12: vs. Washington Capitals

Sunday April 13: @ Washington Capitals

Tuesday April 15: @ Philadelphia Flyers

Thursday April 17: vs. New York Islanders

Of the 12 remaining games, four stand out as crucial to the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes.

Their three matchups against the Senators could be the difference between making or missing the playoffs. If Columbus can win all three, it could push them into a wild card spot and significantly shake up the standings.

The other pivotal game is against the New York Islanders on Thursday, April 17. If the standings remain tight, there's a real possibility that this game will determine the final playoff spot in the East. To add to the drama, it's also Columbus' last game of the season—making it potentially the biggest game of the year.

Buckle up, Blue Jackets fans—the next three weeks are going to be a wild ride.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Add Depth, Potential With Jack Williams Signing

**By William Espy – March 28, 2025**

On Tuesday (March 25), the Columbus Blue Jackets announced the signing of undrafted free agent Jack Williams from Northeastern University. An offensive threat in the very difficult Hockey East conference of the NCAA, Williams is expected to immediately join the Blue Jackets and make his NHL debut sooner rather than later.

### **Collegiate Offensive Threat**

Over the three seasons in the NCAA, Williams developed offensively very quickly. In his freshman season, he had 17 points in 35 games for the Huskies. In his sophomore season, he more than doubled that point total with 36 in 34 games, while also scoring 17 goals. In his junior season, he was named captain for Northeastern and once again set career highs in points with 41 in 31 games, but scored one less goal than the season prior.

Williams' numbers were fairly similar to those of his teammate, Cam Lund, who was recently signed to an entry-level contract by the San Jose Sharks. There are a couple of key differences between the two, though. Lund was drafted in the second round of the 2022 NHL Draft, and is currently just 20 years old, while the undrafted Williams is 23 years of age, meaning he's much further along in his development than Lund. As a result, Williams doesn't have the highest ceiling, but he could become a solid depth option for the Blue Jackets nonetheless.

Although it remains to be seen whether Williams' offensive capabilities will transfer over to the professional game, he's not a one-trick pony either. He brings a high work ethic and strong defensive play as well, which can make him valuable in the long run as a bottom-six forward.

### **Hard-Working Puck Winner**

A strong showing this season would allow Williams to have a good chance at making the NHL again next season, especially if players like Luke Kunin, Sean Kuraly, and Justin Danforth move on during the summer. While the Blue Jackets have exceeded expectations overall this season, they're still a team exiting a rebuild. As a result, a young player like Williams breaking into the bottom-six is exactly what they're hoping for with this signing.

Elite Prospects scout Mitchell Brown was highly complimentary of the impact Williams made earlier this month, stating, "Pace and puck-winning skills are the core of Williams' game. Creates a ton of turnovers with his routes and timed acceleration. Gets under sticks and initiates contact early to create separation. And then he instantly knows the next play, whether that's a quick pass or drive inside."

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell also had a great description of Williams in the organization's press release, saying, "Jack Williams is a skilled, hard-working player with a passion for the game, who was a very productive player and leader during his time at Northeastern."

While Williams looks like more of a depth option for the Blue Jackets in the long run, this organization knows well how quickly a player can surpass expectations. One of the most publicized blunders of the previous management staff was letting William Karlsson be selected by the Vegas Golden Knights in their expansion draft, yet nobody knew what he would be able to do with his new organization. While it's unlikely that he has a Karlsson-like breakout, Williams will continue to develop, and at just 23 years



old, he has plenty of time to prove that he can be more than just a fourth-line fringe forward at the NHL level.

On a more realistic level, Williams has the potential to be another Danforth. A player who outworks everyone and makes it impossible to leave him out of the lineup, even if there are players more skilled than him, and the odds are stacked against him. Undrafted free agents notoriously don't often live up to expectations, but Williams could be the exception to the rule.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Sillinger, Christiansen, New Signings & More

**By Mark Scheig – March 28, 2025**

We have reached the end of March 2025. The Columbus Blue Jackets are right in the thick of the playoff race in the Eastern Conference.

While the team doesn't play again until Friday, they've enjoyed very favorable out of town scores of late. All of the Red Wings, Rangers, Canadiens and Islanders lost their last time out. Even the Ottawa Senators lost to the Buffalo Sabres.

The Blue Jackets still need some help along the way. But if they can start stringing wins together, they're very much alive for a playoff spot.

We start this week's News and Rumors with good injury news. Outside of Kevin Labanc, everyone is healthy on the Blue Jackets. That's going to lead to some very interesting lineup decisions for the rest of this season.

### **Sillinger & Christiansen Medically Cleared**

Head coach Dean Evason confirmed on Wednesday that both Cole Sillinger and Jake Christiansen are potential options for Friday's game against the Canucks. Evason further went on to say that both players have been medically cleared..

Sillinger and Christiansen each had upper-body injuries. There was some concern at the start about Sillinger's availability. His injury forced him out of the Stadium Series. The injury was not as bad as first feared which allowed him the chance to return now.

We'll start to get some clues about Friday's lineup Thursday at practice. Suddenly, the Blue Jackets have to make some hard decisions. There are more bodies available to them than playing spots on the game roster.

Evason admitted this will be a challenge to figure out. But it is something they've already started to talk about.

"We actually went through it a couple of hours ago," Evason said. "It's great, but it is challenging to try to figure out the balance of who plays well together, but there's also an element of the room, the chemistry, all that kind of stuff. But I'll tell you this, it's nice for us that we feel comfortable that whatever decisions we make, the team's just going to go play."

"We haven't had a group here that's been disruptive when they've sat out or not played. I think it's a credit to our leadership group that they are the ones driving into our team and leading in that department. Our communication with individuals in the team is open first and foremost."

It was Yegor Chinakhov who didn't play on Monday night against the New York Islanders. With Sillinger and Christiansen each ready, it will be curious to see who the Blue Jackets decide to sit.

There's another element in play when it comes to roster decisions now too.

### **New Signings**

The Blue Jackets have been busy with a flurry of signings. In all, three players signed on the dotted line this week. One is a Blue Jackets' draftee. The other two are from the NCAA.

The draftee signed was 2024 second-round pick Charlie Elick. He signed a 3-year entry-level contract. Elick and Tri City will start play in the WHL Playoffs.

Meanwhile, Luca Pinelli's season with OHL Ottawa ended without them making the playoffs. He was assigned to the Cleveland Monsters this week. He signed his ELC in April.

The Blue Jackets went into the college free agent pool for their other two signees. They signed both Northeastern captain Jack Williams and North Dakota defenseman Caleb MacDonald to two-year ELC's.

Evason confirmed that Williams will practice with the Blue Jackets once he gets to Columbus. From there, it will be just like any player. Entering the lineup will be based on merit.

"He'll practice," Evason said. "We'll see through practice if he plays or doesn't play. Nothing has been dictated to us that he has to or doesn't have to but he'll be part of our team here practicing and then we'll go from there.

For Elick, he did enough to earn their ELC's with the Blue Jackets. Elick was traded midseason from Brandon to Tri City. Although his numbers have dipped this season, he's a big, mobile defenseman known more as a shutdown defender.

As for Pinelli, he was by far Ottawa's best player with 37 goals. He could see some playing time for the Monsters down the stretch.

The big takeaway from the Williams and MacDonald signings is that the Blue Jackets are being chosen as a destination. Evason admitted in the case of Williams, that Rick Nash was influential in closing the deal on the signing.

We are starting to see more evidence that players are seeing Columbus in a positive light and are willing to choose them when they have the right to choose where they want to go. That points to an improving culture around the team. It also points to the approach the Blue Jackets are using. Having Nash and other front office members involved is paying dividends.

On MacDonald, the Blue Jackets valued his size and sturdy defensive play. He's 6-foot-3 and 224 pounds. This only adds to the trend of the team adding young size on the back end.

Landing two quality NCAA players is good on its own. But winning the right to sign them with half the league or more involved? That's a huge step for the Blue Jackets.

### **Side Dishes**

- Monday's win against the Islanders was the Blue Jackets' first win at UBS Arena. They had to comeback twice in order to get the job done. In particular, the 3-3 goal from Kirill Marchenko stood out.
- Marchenko scored from the right point. Dante Fabbro, who would normally be in that spot, was at the net front. The concept of having a forward cover for a pinching defenseman looms large for a team like the Blue Jackets. It allows them to both cover defensively if the puck gets out. But it also allows them to create more scoring chances should they keep the puck in. Evason admitted this was an area of the game that he showed clips of in recent days.
- "That's something we emphasized a few games ago. We showed some clips of our D being down around the net and then getting out of there and then the puck is delivered there. And now we've basically got four people at the top as opposed to having at least two inside. If the D is down, we want him to stay down. And if he's at the net front and he's screening the goalie, then screen the goalie. It's his teammate's job, responsibility to back him up."

- The latest on Cayden Lindstrom. On Wednesday morning, he skated at the Ice Haus under the watchful eye of multiple skills coaches. From the looks of it, it was an intense skate. It's encouraging to see him put the work in since his surgery. There is still no indication of what comes next for him. The big, lingering question will be where does play hockey next season?
- Here's something to keep an eye on. The Minnesota Wild are in WC1 in the West. Their once big lead for a playoff spot is down to just five. With 10 games left, they appear to be in good shape. But should they falter and miss the playoffs, the Blue Jackets could be the holders of two lottery picks in the 2025 NHL Draft. Their own if they miss the playoffs and the Wild's if they miss. When the trade first happened, the Wild were one of the best teams in the NHL. They've come back to earth a little bit. Regardless, two firsts for the Blue Jackets are huge chips to have when there is a desire to make a big move in the offseason. Stay tuned.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / For The Columbus Blue Jackets, Friday's Game Against The Vancouver Canucks Feels Like An Absolute Must-Win

By Ed Francis – March 28, 2025

Win or lose Friday night, the Columbus Blue Jackets will still be part of the postseason race when Saturday morning comes.

There is a difference between being mathematically in the race and having a realistic chance, though.

In many ways, the season has already been a success. But with the Blue Jackets just two points out of a potential playoff spot days away from April, it's okay for expectations to have changed a bit. This team deserves more than just being a feel-good story that ran out of steam — and regardless of what fans deem to be a successful season, there will not be a single player on the team who will be satisfied with finishing just short.

...and that makes Friday's game against the Vancouver Canucks a huge (and even that's an understatement) game.

As of Thursday, the Blue Jackets are two points behind Montreal for the second wild card spot, with both teams having played 70 games. The New York teams are sandwiched in between at 74, with the Islanders having played 71 games and the Rangers checking in at 72 games played. Detroit is one point behind Columbus, with 71 games in the books.

Based on the current paces of those teams, the Canadiens would finish with 88 points and the last spot in the postseason. The Blue Jackets would finish at 86 and tied with the Islanders for the 9th spot — or, in other words: just short.

But 88 is just a pace.

It will only take one of those teams to get (or, in Montreal's case, *stay*) hot for a more realistic number to be 90-91 points to secure a playoff spot, and that's where the math starts to work itself out.

There are 24 points still available to the Blue Jackets this season. To finish with 88 points, they'll need 15 of those: roughly a 7-4-1 finish.

To finish with 90-91 — a much safer number than 88 — that's 17-18 of the possible 24 points. At that point, it means finishing the season out at around an 8-3-1 or 9-3-0 finish.

From there, it's just a matter of looking at the schedule:

At most, Columbus can lose four of the final 12. A fifth loss and even with regulation wins in the other seven, that's 87 points — and that's not going to be enough.

**Unfortunately, there are a few less-than-positive things that jump out:**

- Facing the Colorado Avalanche and Toronto Maple Leafs twice in a span of three nights. Both teams still have a lot to play for.
- Three games in ten days against the Ottawa Senators. It's not impossible to beat a team three times in ten days, but again, reality: it's a big, big ask — especially when two are on the road, and on top of that, both on the second leg of a back-to-back.
- Speaking of back-to-backs: the Blue Jackets are just 1-8-0 this season on the second half of a back-to-back. They have three to finish the season, including the two against Ottawa.

- A home-and-home against the Washington Capitals, who lead the NHL in points and potentially could be the weekend that Alex Ovechkin breaks the all-time goals record.

Those factors make some of the other games on the schedule feel like must-wins. Columbus has to take care of business at home, they have to take care of business with days off between games, and they have to take care of business against teams who are either out of the playoff picture or fighting to stay alive.

All three of those check the boxes for Friday's game against the Canucks.

The game will be the fifth of a season-long, six-game road trip for Vancouver and will be their third game of the week. Columbus will enter the game coming off three days off and as healthy as they've been all season, with both Cole Sillinger and Jake Christiansen possibilities to play and Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson having returned to the lineup Monday.

The Blue Jackets can still lose some games on the schedule and make it.

Friday just doesn't feel like one of them.

## The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 attendance check-in: Almost league-wide gains as season nears its finale

By Harman Dayal and Hailey Salvian – March 28, 2025

Twenty NHL teams have seen an increase in their average attendance since the calendar flipped to 2025. In contrast, only six teams have seen a decline at the box office during this time frame, with nearly all of the dips being negligible.

The takeaway: Most NHL teams are filling seats easily down the stretch of the 2024-25 season. This isn't a surprising trend — the league's second-half attendance has typically been stronger in years past. It's still a healthy indicator, however, given how large a driver ticket sales are for overall hockey-related revenue.

With approximately 85 percent of the season completed, we're going to take an updated look at each team's home attendance numbers.

We'll break down these numbers in a couple of ways in this piece. The first separates how close teams are to playing to a full house on a nightly basis so far this season. The second analyzes home attendance figures from a similar point last season, allowing for a direct comparison for each franchise.

From there, we will be able to see which teams have made the biggest gains and losses year over year.

### **A few disclaimers for our readers regarding these attendance figures:**

1. Attendance figures used are from Hockey-Reference and include all games played through Monday, March 24.
2. In the event of a discrepancy in arena capacity size, we went with the official number supplied by a team's media guide or arena website (when available).
3. Utah Hockey Club isn't included in this piece, as we covered their unique situation in detail in our November attendance look. Because of the club's relocation from Arizona to Salt Lake City and the different buildings involved, this exercise doesn't work for them.
4. Some teams have played overseas or outdoor games that technically counted as "home" appearances. We're excluding those games from the average attendance figures.

### **Biggest climbers**

#### **Winnipeg Jets: +996 fans/game (7.5 percent increase)**

The positive momentum has continued for the Jets, both on and off the ice.

After a 3-2 overtime win against the Washington Capitals on Tuesday night, Winnipeg clinched a playoff spot for the third straight year. The Jets have the second-best record in the league, with an NHL-best 49 wins through 72 games.

The team is also up year-over-year at the gate, and since our last attendance update in January (+178). Now, it's not a massive victory lap for attendance in Winnipeg. Its actual attendance number (14,219) is the second lowest in the league, given the size of Canada Life Centre.

But these are still significant improvements from last year, when team chairman Mark Chipman sounded the alarm on the attendance. Beyond just their play, the Jets have done well to improve their game-day experience, with improved food and beverage offerings and an upgraded sound system.

And The Athletic's Jets writer Murat Ates can attest to the vibes in Winnipeg being much better this season.

"The building seems like a more fun place to be this year," he said. "The crowds have gotten snarky in a good way again, too, with chants such as 'U.S. backup' (at Jake Oettinger) hearkening back to the old days."

#### **Florida Panthers: +569 fans/game (3.0 percent increase)**

The reigning Stanley Cup champions are contenders once again, which is an obvious reason for the Panthers to be risers year-over-year. Matthew Tkachuk has emerged as one of the most marketable players in the league, even appearing on "The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon" after the 4 Nations Face-Off. He's not the only reason for an uptick in attendance, but it certainly doesn't hurt.

Florida's attendance has also improved over the last few months after another splashy trade deadline by GM Bill Zito — adding Brad Marchand — and as fans gear up for another deep playoff run.

#### **Washington Capitals: +474 fans/game (2.7 percent increase)**

This one is really easy to understand.

The Capitals have the best record in the league and were the first team to clinch a playoff spot last week. Oh, and Alex Ovechkin is closing in on Wayne Gretzky's long-standing NHL goal record.

Capital One Arena has announced sellouts for every Capitals home game in March, with the Ovechkin countdown reaching single digits early in the month.

With a goal against the Jets on Tuesday night, Ovechkin is now only six goals away from history.

#### **San Jose Sharks: +309 fans/game (2.3 percent increase)**

Macklin Celebrini has helped perk up the Sharks' attendance with almost 14,000 fans per game at this point in the season. The 18-year-old is a true centerpiece for a rebuilding franchise and is second in rookie scoring — only two points behind Montreal defender Lane Hutson — with 52 points in 58 games. His 21 goals lead all rookies.

His linemate Will Smith (fourth in rookie scoring) helps too. Not to mention, their friendship is endearing to fans even outside of San Jose.

#### **Biggest declines**

#### **Pittsburgh Penguins: -1,187 fans/game (6.6 percent decrease)**

The Penguins continue to be one of the biggest fallers at the box office this season, and it's not hard to understand why.

Sidney Crosby could clinch a 20th season averaging at least a point per game, which would pass Wayne Gretzky (19) for the most in NHL history. Crosby is on an eight-game point streak and is still a reason to watch the Penguins. But, that only goes so far when we're talking about a spoiled fan base watching another losing season.

The team's 16,667 average attendance is the lowest since 2006-07, when the team was playing at Mellon Arena. With the old rink's capacity in mind, that number was close to a sellout. So we're actually looking at 2003-04 — the pre-Crosby era — to find a building this empty in Pittsburgh.

#### **Los Angeles Kings: -757 fans/game (4.2 percent decrease)**



The Kings are a tad perplexing. The team is good — seventh in the league standings — and its numbers have improved from the mid-November attendance check-in (up to 17,189 from 16,931). But still, only the Penguins have fallen off more in the year-over-year box office.

Maybe there's no big reason for this. Sometimes there are fluctuations in attendance over an 82-game season. Not to mention, the Kings do well relative to other teams, with almost a 95 percent capacity rate, better than 11 other teams.

Or maybe there's a bit of wait-and-see going on with the fan base. Sure, the team is good now, but will it be when it really matters? Or are the Kings on another path to lose to the Edmonton Oilers in the first round for a fourth straight season?

Beyond that, the Kings have a roster full of good players and some obvious names (Drew Doughty and Anze Kopitar), but not a must-see superstar. It might take that big brand-name player or a real playoff run to get fans — beyond the usual attendees — charged up about the team again.

#### **New York Islanders: -477 fans/game (2.9 percent decrease)**

The Islanders are interesting as there's been an uptick in their crowd sizes since the November and January check-ins, but there's still a year-over-year drop at UBS Arena.

It makes sense for them to be trending downward overall; the Islanders haven't won a playoff series since 2020-21 and have one of the oldest rosters in the league. But it also makes sense for there to be more fans showing up in recent months because they've been much better in the second half of the season.

The team went on a seven-game win streak through January and into February and has put itself only one point out of a wild-card spot. Fans might continue to show up if the Islanders can make a push for the playoffs down the stretch.

#### **Chicago Blackhawks: -254 fans/game (1.4 percent decrease)**

Chicago is still top-10 in the league-wide attendance with 18,516 average fans. But that figure has dropped slightly from last season.

Last year's attendance saw a notable bump from Connor Bedard's arrival, but with another difficult season on the ice — the team has already been eliminated from the playoffs — the crowd sizes have begun to shrink.

The Blackhawks had only their third sellout of the season on March 23 against the Philadelphia Flyers, one of the team's "Best Day Ever" kids-themed game nights. They also have had four crowds under 17,000, well under the United Center's capacity.

#### **Teams to watch**

##### **Ottawa Senators**

When we did our early season November check-in, the Senators were only hitting 89 percent capacity. They've bumped that up to 94 percent average capacity for the season and have seen the largest increase in average attendance of any NHL team since our January check-in.

Ottawa hasn't dipped below 17,000 fans for a home game since late January. During those nine home games, the Sens have averaged 18,332 fans, which is just over 98 percent of capacity. The big difference is that the team is finally winning, with the Senators on track to make the playoffs for the first time in eight years.

**Their overall attendance this season is down ever so slightly, but there are a few key factors to explain that:**

- The Sens got off to a disappointing 8-11-1 start. Couple that with the franchise's lengthy playoff drought, and you can understand why the first-half attendance was a little bit soft.
- Ottawa hosted the World Juniors this year, which meant some locals saved their hard-earned dollars for those games.
- The Senators didn't have any home games during the second half of December, when teams usually have an easier time selling tickets because of the Christmas holidays.

It'll be interesting to track whether the recently improved home attendance will translate into significant gains next season. Can sustained on-ice success outweigh the headwinds of the club's poor arena location?

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

The Flyers have improved their average attendance by nearly 1,400 fans per game since our early-season check-in. However, this is more of a seasonal trend than an exciting big-picture sign, because the club's attendance arc throughout last season was nearly identical and Philadelphia's year-over-year attendance numbers are basically flat. It's easier to attract fans to Flyers games in the second half of the season when football isn't dominating the local sports conversation: a phenomenon that's true for many NHL cities in the U.S.

That said, it's still notable that Philadelphia's attendance is holding steady and gradually increasing. The Flyers sold off pieces at the deadline and have had an abysmal 5-14-3 record, the worst mark in the NHL, since Jan. 28. Despite on-ice misery, the Flyers have packed at least 18,000 fans for every game during their last two homestands. That could be a positive sign for ownership that fans should stay loyal through this potential rebuild.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

Columbus' second-half attendance has been much stronger, which is the same trend we saw last season. This appears to be a market where the end of the college football season helps sports fans turn more of their attention toward the Blue Jackets.

Their year-over-year attendance numbers are flat, but it bears mentioning that this doesn't include the outdoor game at Ohio Stadium against the Red Wings. This event was a smashing success, drawing a monster crowd of 94,751 and generating excellent TV ratings.

Let's see if the improved on-ice product this season can translate to improved attendance numbers next year.

### **Calgary Flames**

The scrappy, underdog Flames are still in the thick of the playoff race, making them one of the league's better stories this season.

Calgary's attendance is up slightly compared to last season and has been gradually climbing compared to our early and midseason check-in numbers. The Flames' surprisingly competitive season obviously helps that cause; it'll be fascinating to see if the box office demand continues increasing down the stretch with high-stakes games carrying huge playoff implications.

Long term, all eyes are on the Flames' new arena development. The early renderings for Scotia Place, which is expected to be ready for the 2027-28 season, look gorgeous. And if the Flames can continue

building an exciting young core in time for that arena launch, it could be the perfect recipe for a major boost in attendance/revenue.

### **St. Louis Blues**

Last year, the Blues sold out 40 of their 41 home games. St. Louis' average attendance of 97.7 percent this season is still very healthy, but sellouts have been harder to come by, with only five of the club's first 12 home games drawing a full crowd. There was even a stretch from mid-January to early February where the Blues couldn't get a single sellout in nine home games.

The Blues are the hottest team in the NHL since the 4 Nations Face-Off, however, and that's led to renewed fan interest. St. Louis has sold out Enterprise Center in four consecutive games. Looks like the franchise is finishing strong on and off the ice.

## The Athletic / Four players, Windsor Spitfires, OHL and CHL named in sexual assault allegation from 1984

**By Katie Strang, Dan Robson and Chris Johnston – March 28, 2025**

A lawsuit has been filed against four unnamed Windsor Spitfires players in connection with an alleged group sexual assault that took place in 1984 in Tecumseh, Ontario, according to the statement of claim filed with the Windsor Superior Court of Justice on Tuesday. The lawsuit also names the Spitfires, the Ontario Hockey League and the Canadian Hockey League as defendants.

The plaintiff in the case, who is also unidentified and referred to as “Jane Doe,” said in her claim that she lost consciousness during an end-of-season party in the spring of 1984 and awoke “unable to move” and with her clothing removed and one of the players “on top of her, penetrating her vagina with his penis.” The woman said the other three players “then took turns engaging in vaginal penetration of the plaintiff.”

According to the claim, which alleges “sexual abuse, assault and battery,” an additional player from the Spitfires “was present throughout the assault but did not sexually assault the plaintiff while she was conscious.” The plaintiff said she didn’t know whether that player assaulted her before she regained consciousness, but her “only recollection was of the player standing in the corner of the room in an emotional state and crying throughout the remainder of the assaults.”

All five players, the four co-defendants and the additional player who was present during the alleged assault, are identified in the lawsuit as John Does.

The woman’s attorney, London, Ontario-based Rob Talach, said the alleged incident represents a “never-ending haunting” for his client, who is now 59 years old.

“The fact that more than four decades later she’s taking pretty extensive action on this, shows that it’s bothered her up until this day and will continue to,” Talach said. “I mean, these are irreparable harms.”

The statement of claim details the plaintiff’s fear of “imminent physical harm of a sexual nature by the players,” which caused her to feel “terror and fear.” “The John Doe defendants had complete control over the plaintiff and had isolated her from others,” the claim states, adding that the defendants’ actions were without the woman’s consent and that “no consent would be possible owing to her level of intoxication.” The claim states she also put the players “on notice” that the actions were “unwanted.”

In the claim, the plaintiff said the players inflicted “pain and suffering, mental suffering, humiliation and degradation” during the alleged assault, “interfered with her well-being solely for the purpose of their own sexual gratification” and had a joint plan and/or common intention to engage in sexual activity with the plaintiff without regard to her consent or well-being, including “administering the plaintiff drugs or other substances without her knowledge or consent and with the intention of rendering her unconscious.”

The claim alleges that the Spitfires, OHL and CHL were negligent and failed the plaintiff by ignoring or failing “to reasonably address institutionalized and systemic abuse,” perpetuating “a toxic environment that condones violent and sexualized conduct, including sexual assault,” failing “to have any, or a proper, system of reporting of sexual abuse” and ignoring “reports of sexual assault and harassment.”

The organizations “condoned a culture and environment that glorified the degradation and sexual exploitation of young women,” the claim states.

The claim also alleges the organizations “failed to report the John Doe defendants to the police after receiving complaints of sexual misconduct,” though it does not provide any further detail about these complaints.

The Spitfires’ current GM, Bill Bowler, said he was unaware of the court filing when contacted. Josh Sweetland, director of communications for the OHL, on behalf of the OHL and CHL, said: “The League has not been formally served with a Statement of Claim, therefore we are not in a position to comment on the matter at this time.”

The plaintiff in the case said she has suffered mental anguish,” suicidal thoughts and ideation,” depression and “signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.”

A jury notice was also filed with the court on March 25.

The allegation comes within weeks of the start of the high-profile sexual assault trial of five members of the 2018 Canadian world juniors national team.

Those charges followed an alleged incident inside a room at the Delta London Armouries Hotel in London, Ont., in June 2018, after a Hockey Canada gala at which the team had been celebrated for its gold medal win at the World Junior Championship.

Carter Hart, Michael McLeod, Dillon Dube, Alex Formenton and Cal Foote jointly agreed to have a trial by a jury. That trial will begin on April 22 in London.

The Parliament of Canada is scrutinizing what the organization did and didn't do upon learning of the allegations.

Hockey Canada settled a lawsuit in 2022 with the young woman who said she was sexually assaulted by the players, who were originally identified as John Does in the lawsuits. Talach was the woman’s civil attorney in the proceedings.

News of the settled lawsuit in May 2022 led to a reckoning within Hockey Canada, which faced parliamentary hearings into the organization’s handling of the incident and led to scrutiny over how funds were used to settle past allegations. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau condemned the federation, and prominent sponsors withdrew their support.

London Police reopened an investigation into the allegations in July 2022. Also that summer, Halifax police opened an investigation into an alleged sexual assault involving members of the 2003 Canadian world junior team.

In January 2024, London Police laid charges against the five members of the 2018 World Junior team and later issued an apology to the alleged victim.

Talach, who has handled sex abuse cases for over two decades, said the 2018 Hockey Canada case “absolutely” influenced his client to come forward with her claim from 1984.

“The Hockey Canada case of 2018 was really the first time that we’ve kind of elevated that story to a national level and I think it encouraged lots of people to confront their own past,” he said.

Talach said that the 2018 Hockey Canada case is not a “one-off”: “There’s a culture problem in hockey that seems to arise from the junior hockey years. So we’re just going to continue to deal with these as people feel the courage to disclose.”

## The Athletic / NHL empty-net goals may feel 'sleazy,' but they count all the same

By Mark Lazerus – March 28, 2025

It's got to be a one-timer from the left circle, right? Probably on the power play. You can picture it so easily — down on one knee, getting all of it, blasting a hole in the back of the net. That's how Alex Ovechkin gets No. 895. A breakaway could be fun, too. He doesn't get as many of those these days, but back in the day, few things were more terrifying than Ovechkin hurtling through the neutral zone with a full head of steam. A rebound or a deflection would be a little less memorable, but Ovechkin's done plenty of damage around the net in the last 20 years. It's not ideal, not the kind of goal you put on a poster, but it could work.

Just not an empty-net goal, right? Anything but an empty-netter. So anticlimactic. So easy. So unworthy of the accomplishment. There's just something about scoring when the opposing goalie is pulled, isn't there? Like those goals shouldn't count the same as a perfectly hit one-timer or a sweet forehand-to-backhand move on a daring drive to the net. Can you imagine Ovechkin throwing himself into the glass in a historic celebration after an empty-netter? Ugh. Even players look sheepish when they score them. Empty-netters? More like empty calories.

"Sometimes you get two in a game, or you get a couple points off them, and you feel kind of sleazy," said the Colorado Avalanche's Nathan MacKinnon, who has four of empty-netters this season. "But what are you supposed to do? You're up by one, a minute left, you've got to put it in the net. It comes with being on a good team. You get leads, and then you get those. I get it, though. People don't love it, I'm sure. But the whole point is just to end the game."

End the game. Wait. Hang on a second. Think about that for a moment. Empty-netters end the game. They're the true game-winning goals. Score one and you've assured victory. They end the tension, they deflate the opponent, they send the fans home. They're huge. So what if Ovechkin is the NHL's all-time leader in empty-net goals? So what if more than 7 percent of his career goal totals came without an opposing goaltender on the ice?

That means more than 7 percent of his goals guaranteed a Washington Capitals win. That's not nothing. And look who's next on the list — Wayne Gretzky, the man Ovechkin is chasing for the all-time goals record. Gretzky scored 56 empty-netters in his career. After that, it's Marián Hossa (40), Brad Marchand (38), Sidney Crosby (36) and Mario Lemieux (33). Pretty good company.

When will Alex Ovechkin pass Wayne Gretzky?

We're tracking Ovechkin's pursuit of Gretzky's goal record and trying to determine the game in which he's most likely to break the record.

No, there's no shame in an empty-netter. In fact, there's an art to it.

"We take a lot of pride in it," said the Winnipeg Jets' Kyle Connor, who has three empty-netters this year after scoring four last year. "When it's six-on-five, you've got to be able to shut the game down, to end it. If you don't finish it and they tie it and you go to overtime, you're giving up points. Obviously, it doesn't get the hype of a normal goal, but it's a big factor in the game. They count all the same."

Brock Boeser was hemming and hawing. The question posed to him was simple: When there's an empty net at the other end of the ice, should you shoot for it the moment the puck touches your stick, no matter how deep you are in your own end?

"It depends on the situation," the Vancouver Canucks right wing said. "Say your team's up by two goals instead of one, then you might as well let it fly."

At this point, a few minutes into the conversation, Boeser's lockermate, Elias Pettersson, had heard enough.

"You let it fly every time!" Pettersson, a Canucks center, loudly interjected while laughing.

"No, not last time," Boeser snootily corrected before returning to his questioner. "He's a little upset with me on a couple of them."

The follow-up is a little more complex. Has hockey protocol changed in recent years? Is it no longer gauche to fire 170-foot wrist shots at a yawning cage? Have NHL teams decided it's worth risking an icing infraction to have a chance at the goal? Should Boeser have thrown his guy Pettersson a bone?

"I don't know," Boeser said before dramatically turning and offering Pettersson a hard stare worthy of Paddington Bear. "I'm just focused on winning."

There's no question that the stigma of shooting the puck the length of the ice is a thing of the past. Watch any one-goal game, and in the final two minutes, you're bound to see a handful of icing calls as the team that's up a goal turns and fires any chance it gets. That used to be a rarity in the NHL. Sure, if you have a clear path, you'll carry the puck out of the zone and either rag the puck or pass it to an open teammate with a clean look at the goal. Or, if you're under pressure and can't get a shot off, you'll try to lob the puck into the neutral zone or bank it off the boards. Anything to get another 10 seconds off the clock.

But if you have a chance, shoot. No matter where you are. That seems to be the league's new empty-net etiquette.

"Guys have different opinions on it," said the Calgary Flames' Blake Coleman, who tied for the league lead with seven empty-netters last season (he has three this season). "But I've always been for it. If you have a chance to put the game away, you should take it. And guys are good enough in this league that they have a pretty good chance of hitting that net, even from far away."

Teams do practice playing five-on-six and six-on-five. But you won't see a lot of players working on full-rink shots in practices or at morning skates. In games, though, it's becoming more and more of a reflex for players around the league. Sometimes, it's easier to shoot from 150 feet than it is to skate up the ice and shoot from closer range. Because sometimes, your brain gets in the way.

"If we practiced it, we would pretty much make it every time," Pettersson said. "In games, you have that moment to think, it's like, 'Oh, s—.'"

"There's more pressure that way, yeah," Boeser chimed in. "Once you think about it, there's a little pressure. And if you get a couple stickhandles in, you're definitely thinking about it. If the puck's wobbling or bouncing, you're like, 'Don't mess this up.' It can be easier to just let it fly."

Another hockey taboo is being selfish. Rookie snipers always seem to defer to older players, turning up shots and forcing passes. Same thing goes for empty-netters. As MacKinnon said, it can feel "sleazy" to get a cheapie, so players often try to reward their teammates with empty-net goals. If a player has scored two goals in a game, you can be sure the coach will put him out there if the opposing net is empty, and all of his teammates will be trying to put the puck on his stick so he can get the hat trick.

But being selfish is important. It's necessary. Vegas learned that the hard way earlier this month in a game against the Buffalo Sabres. Up 3-2 in the final minute, the Golden Knights' Tomáš Hertl had the game on his stick when he picked Ryan McLeod's pocket and headed up ice toward the empty net. But

rather than simply shoot the puck into the net, he looked over his shoulder, saw Jack Eichel joining the rush, and tried an unnecessary and overly fancy drop pass to hook up his teammate. Buffalo's Rasmus Dahlin broke up the pass, then scored the equalizer 14 seconds later.

Sometimes the well-lubricated fans in the 300 level are right: Just shoot the dang puck.

"That's more of a locker-room thing — you want to be a good guy and help teammates out getting their points or their accolades," Coleman said. "But if the opportunity is there, you want to take it. You don't want to risk not winning the game."

"There's a time and a place," Connor said. "If you're on a two-on-one, you're burying that 100 percent. But if a guy makes a good play going up the ice, or he's going for a hat trick, you want to tap it over to him. Guys are always looking for someone to finish it off."

The selfish play is almost always the right play in these situations. Everyone understands that. But that doesn't mean you won't catch any grief from your teammates after you take the freebie.

"Everybody's always open when the net's empty," Coleman said with a laugh.

Jets forward Brandon Tanev isn't exactly a goal scorer. His career high is 16 in 2022-23 with the Seattle Kraken. In 542 career games, he's scored 84 times. But 14 of those goals — nearly 17 percent! — have been empty-netters. He had five in that career season alone.

For every Ovechkin who's out there in the dying minutes, lingering near the blue line, hoping for an outlet pass that will lead to a game-clinching empty-netter, there are a couple of Tanev types — gritty, defensive-minded players just trying to hold onto a lead against a team loading up for the tying tally. An empty-netter can be a perk for that type of player.

"Those goals are nice to come by when they do happen," Tanev said. "It's a hidden reward for doing the job at the end of the game. Guys are more concerned about the two points (in the standings for a win). But if something does happen like that, it's a good bonus."

The final minute of a one- or two-goal game is prime NHL real estate. Every player wants to be on the ice when the game is on the line, every player wants to be trusted to close a game out against the other team's top players, and, yes, every player wants a crack at that empty net.

Being able to score from 150 feet away is a good selling point. But having a coach's trust is a bigger one. Tanev has always had his coaches' trust. Even in college. Yes, he scored the NCAA championship-winning goal for Providence College in 2015, firing the puck into the net over Boston University goalie Matt O'Connor's left shoulder. But before that, he also scored empty-netters that sealed the regional semifinal against Miami University and the regional final against Denver University that same spring. Late in a close game? That's Tanev time.

"If you're on the ice five-on-six, your coaches have a trust in you to get done what needs to be done," Tanev said. "And if there's an opportunity to push for an empty net and close the game out, guys have an understanding — a read, or just the vision — of the situation. Guys like me aren't really pushing to score that goal. But if the opportunity presents itself, we're all for it."

Coleman is the perfect five-on-six player — a guy who's a proven scorer but also has a reliable two-way mindset. For that same reason, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the Tampa Bay Lightning's Brandon Hagel — a very gifted, very fast but very responsible player on a very good team — is a modern empty-net master, with a league-high 18 ENGs over the past three seasons.



Some players (Ovechkin and Gretzky included) are thinking about scoring the game-ending goal the moment the opposing goalie leaves the crease. But the Colemans and Tanevs and Hagels of the world are thinking the opposite.

“It’s defense. You’re thinking defense,” Coleman said. “I view it as I would a penalty kill. If the opportunity (to score) is there, you take it. And if it’s not, you play it safe and get the puck out. That’s the mindset.”

There is some nuance, of course. If you’re holding a two-goal lead, you’re more likely to chuck it and risk the icing. If you’re playing with a center who’s strong on faceoffs, you’re also more likely to risk the icing, knowing he can win the defensive-zone draw if you miss the net. If the clock is down to the last 10 or 15 seconds, the smart play is to just loft the puck out of your zone or skate it out, because once you cross the blue line, the opponent’s pretty much out of time. If there are sticks and bodies in the way, a high chip or a bank off the boards is a better choice than risking a turnover with a shot attempt.

But there’s never anything wrong with trying to score. Ovechkin knows it. Gretzky knew it. Goals are good. Empty-net goals are great. They’re game-enders, after all.

“They’re adding it to his goal count, I’m sure,” MacKinnon said of Ovechkin’s unrivaled empty-net prowess. “They’re not going to take those away. It’s like in the NBA, you have free-throw merchants and things like that. (Garbage time) in the NFL. Stat padders. In every sport, there’s some sort of parallel.”

And you know what? They all count the same.

“At the end of the day,” Connor said, “they don’t ask how. They ask how many.”

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Checking in on top prospects for all 32 teams](#)

By Ryan Dixon – March 28, 2025

While NHL clubs are still firmly in the stretch drive, the playoffs have already arrived for many high-level hockey players elsewhere.

In major junior, the three leagues are set to embark on a two-month journey that will culminate with three teams joining the host Rimouski Oceanic at the Memorial Cup, beginning May 22. As for the NCAA, 16 teams are now set to scrap it out for a spot in the Frozen Four final, which is set for April 12 in St. Louis.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, playoffs are underway on European pro circuits, too.

For many NHL teams that won't be making the playoffs, fans are already wondering which prospects might be able to make the jump next fall to improve the big club's fortunes. And even clubs with Stanley Cup hopes need to keep the pipeline flowing, as those cost-controlled, entry-level contracts mean a player can provide serious bang for your buck.

With playoffs ramping up in leagues across the globe, we thought we'd use this week's power rankings to see how a notable prospect or two has fared for all 32 clubs.

**1. Washington Capitals (47-15-9)** Ryan Leonard is the rare prospect you believe can really help an NHL team in the playoffs the second he's done with college. Leonard, the eighth-overall pick from 2023, is chasing a national title with Boston College, but his size and strength could help lengthen the Caps lineup after that. By the way, Aliaksei Protas' younger brother, Ilya, had an incredible debut OHL season with the Windsor Spitfires, finishing second in league scoring with 124 points. Five years after taking Aliaksei in the 2019 third round, Washington snagged Ilya in last year's Round 3. On top of that, Andrew Cristall (40th overall, 2023) led the WHL in scoring with 132 points and Cole Hutson (43rd overall, 2024) became the first defenceman in nearly 20 years to lead the World Junior Championship in scoring. This organization is just killing it.

**2. Winnipeg Jets (49-19-4)** Elias Salomonsson, a second-rounder in 2022, made his North American pro debut this year with the AHL's Manitoba Moose and, basically, it could not have gone any better. The right-shot defenceman, who turns 21 this summer, could really push for a spot on the blueline next spring.

**3. Dallas Stars (46-21-4)** Emil Hemming, the 29th-overall selection last year, joined the OHL's Barrie Colts from Finland for this season. The winger finished strong with eight points in his final eight games and he's on a good Colts team that has a shot at a post-season run.

**4. Los Angeles Kings (40-21-9)** Big winger Liam Greentree — the 26th pick in 2024 — took a nice step in his draft-plus-one season. He finished third in OHL scoring with 119 points behind potential 2025 first-overall pick Michael Misa and his Windsor teammate, Ilya Protas.

**5. Vegas Golden Knights (43-20-8)** 2024 first-rounder Trevor Connelly won gold with Team USA at the WJC, but had an injury-marred freshman season with Providence College. He'll be looking to step up as a sophomore next season.

**6. Colorado Avalanche (44-25-3)** Ilya Nabokov, 22, has been one of the better goalies in the KHL for the past two seasons. It's always a bit murky trying to predict when Russian players will land in North America, but Nabokov — a second-rounder last summer — could make the jump by next fall.

**7. Carolina Hurricanes (43-24-4)** Bradley Nadeau is leading all AHL rookies in goals with 27. That's a wonderful showing for the 19-year-old, who was taken 30th overall in 2023. D-man Scott Morrow, a second-rounder in 2021, also had a fantastic freshman campaign in the AHL and got an NHL call-up in March.

**8. Florida Panthers (43-25-3)** Jack Devine, a seventh-rounder in 2022, is trying to finish his fourth and final NCAA season with a second straight title in Denver. The small winger plays a tenacious game and will likely keep pursuing his NHL dream in the AHL next year.

**9. Toronto Maple Leafs (43-25-3)** There's a reason the Leafs hung onto Easton Cowan (28th overall in 2023) when they were trading prospects at the deadline. His ceiling remains that of a top-six guy and he'll be on a mission to help London — which lost in the Memorial Cup final last year — finish the job and go all the way in 2025.

**10. St. Louis Blues (38-28-7)** The Blues are making a playoff push and you wonder, should they get there, if winger Jimmy Snuggerud will join them. The University of Minnesota junior — the 23rd-overall selection in 2022 — led the Golden Gophers in goals (22) and assists (27) this season.

**11. Tampa Bay Lightning (41-25-5)** Isaac Howard, the 31st pick in 2022, took a huge offensive leap as an NCAA junior. On a Michigan State team where nobody else scored more than 12 goals, Howard scored 26. He'll be the go-to offensive guy as the Spartans try to make the Frozen Four.

**12. Edmonton Oilers (41-25-5)** Matthew Savoie — drafted by ninth overall by Buffalo in 2022 and traded to Edmonton last summer — has shown some offensive flash as an AHL rookie. Though he's cooled a bit lately with Bakersfield, Savoie put up 14 points in a 12-game stretch from late January through early March.

**13. Calgary Flames (34-25-11)** Zayne Parekh might be hockey's top prospect in terms of offence-first defencemen. The ninth-overall pick in 2024 posted his second consecutive 33-goal campaign with the Saginaw Spirit and his 107 points made him just the 10th D-man in OHL history to hit the century mark and the first since Windsor's Ryan Ellis in 2010-11.

**14. Minnesota Wild (40-27-5)** The conversation about the top prospect in hockey probably comes down to a Canadiens-affiliated Russian forward we'll mention shortly and Minnesota's Zeev Buium. Somehow, Buium fell to 12th overall last June. Two years ago, the Wild added Brock Faber out of college and he instantly became an impact defenceman on the path to stardom. This spring, it'll be the same story for Buium once he's done chasing a second straight NCAA title with Denver.

**15. Vancouver Canucks (34-26-12)** Jonathan Lekkerimaki — the 15th pick in 2022 — is up with the big club and notched a huge goal this week in New Jersey. His 19 goals in 32 AHL games this season tell the story of an undersized scoring winger who is adapting well to North America.

**16. New Jersey Devils (38-28-7)** It will be fascinating to see how things play out on the Devils blueline in coming seasons. They have right-shot Simon Nemec — the second-overall pick from 2022 who's in Jersey now — another righty in offence-oriented Seamus Casey (second-rounder, 2022) and six-foot-seven Russian Anton Silayev (10th overall last June), whose strong skating gives him the potential to be an extremely rare presence on the back end. Are they all Devils in two years?

**17. Ottawa Senators (37-28-5)** Big body, big (right) shot, bit of a mean streak; it's not hard to see why the Sens took Carter Yakemchuk seventh overall last June. He hasn't produced this season the way he did in his draft-eligible year, but let's see what he does with the Calgary Hitmen in the WHL post-season.

**18. Montreal Canadiens (33-28-9)** Understandably, most of the attention goes to Ivan Demidov, a super-skilled winger who — after slipping to fifth overall in 2024 — is expected to join Montreal from the KHL next fall and immediately fill a second-line role. The less-talked about story, though, is that of David Reinbacher. Drafted fifth overall a year before Demidov, Reinbacher sustained a knee injury in pre-season action that looked like it might scuttle his whole season. Instead, he's back playing in the AHL with top-flight Laval and looks good patrolling the right side of the blueline.

**19. New York Islanders (32-29-10)** Given their druthers, the Isles would have hung onto Brock Nelson at the deadline. That said, flipping him to Colorado for forward Calum Ritchie — the 27th pick in 2023 — was one heck of a backup plan. Ritchie — who scored a goal in a seven-game showing with the Avs in the fall — instantly became the Isles' top prospect and will turn pro next year.

**20. Utah Hockey Club (32-28-11)** Tij Iginla — the sixth-overall pick last year — had hip surgery in December that ended his season. He'll be looking for a monster draft-plus-two campaign with the Kelowna Rockets next year. Keep an eye on KHLer Dmitry Simashev. The sixth-overall pick one year before Iginla, Simashev is easy to overlook because, unsurprisingly, he doesn't post big offensive numbers as a young D-man in Russia. He's long (six-foot-five) and smooth, which is an ultra-desired package on NHL bluelines.

**21. Anaheim Ducks (31-32-8)** Boy, the Ducks know how to unearth defencemen. Tristan Luneau, a second-rounder in 2022, has the best points-per-game mark of any AHL defenceman who's played at least 20 games this year, at 0.96. Luneau is a righty who could make the permanent NHL jump next fall.

**22. New York Rangers (34-32-6)** Winger Gabe Perreault has two WJC golds to his credit and is chasing an NCAA title with Boston College. It sure looks like the Rangers got a good one 23rd overall in 2023.

**23. Columbus Blue Jackets (32-29-9)** Defenceman Denton Mateychuk made the NHL jump in December and the 12th pick in 2022 should be an offensive presence at the highest level for a long time. The tough story in Columbus is the fact Cayden Lindstrom, the fourth-overall selection last June, is going to miss the entire season and — thanks to a back trouble — will play a total of 36 games over two years with the Medicine Hat Tigers. Fans are hoping this young man has a monster season next year in the Dub.

**24. Pittsburgh Penguins (29-33-11)** Rutger McGroarty really hit his stride in the back half of the AHL season. Even with just one point in his past five outings, the big winger has 18 points in 19 games in February and March. McGroarty, of course, was chosen 14th overall by the Jets in 2022, but did not want to play in Winnipeg. He was swapped to Pittsburgh for Brandon Yager — pick No. 14 in 2023 — last summer. Ville Koivunen, a second-round selection of Carolina's in 2021 who was sent to Pittsburgh 13 months ago in the deal that sent Jake Guentzel the Canes, leads all AHL rookies in scoring, with 55 points in 62 games.

**25. Detroit Red Wings (33-32-6)** Axel Sandin-Pellikka produced a point total of 29 points in 46 games, which is incredibly impressive for a 19-year-old playing in Sweden's top league (he just turned 20 on March 11). The idea of a top four in Detroit that will include two huge guys in Simon Edvinsson and Moritz Seider alongside the dynamic, five-foot-10 Sandin-Pellikka should make Wings fans very excited. Like Seider, Sandin-Pellikka is a right shot.

**26. Buffalo Sabres (29-35-6)** Isak Rosen, the 14th pick in 2021, has seen his production increase in all three of his AHL seasons. After going 27-27-54 in 55 games this season, he's in Buffalo for his second

NHL look. Noah Ostlund, drafted 16th in 2022, is on fire in 2025 as an AHL rookie; the winger has 28 points in his past 28 outings.

**27. Seattle Kraken (30-36-6)** Berkly Catton, the eighth-overall pick last June, has a good chance to be that top-of-the-lineup threat the Kraken just haven't had enough of in their brief existence. Catton is one of the top offensive players in the WHL and could go on a run with Spokane playing alongside offensive wizard (and Caps pick) Andrew Cristall.

**28. Nashville Predators (27-36-8)** Tanner Molendyk was traded from Saskatoon to the powerhouse Medicine Hat Tigers and is a point-per-game defenceman in the Dub. The 24th pick from 2023 has a great shot to be an all-situations defender in Nashville.

**29. Boston Bruins (30-34-9)** Fraser Minten, acquired from the Leafs at the deadline, was always viewed as a high-character, high-floor prospect after being taken in 2022's second round. He's got seven points in as many games with the Providence Bruins and the B's obviously hope there's not just a solid citizen coming, but maybe a second-line centre.

**30. Philadelphia Flyers (28-36-9)** It's worth remembering, on the prospect front, it's just a monster win that the Flyers got Matvei Michkov in North America for this season at least two years ahead of when most expected he'd land. Meanwhile, after making the Flyers just four months following his 13th-overall selection in June, centre Jett Luchanko didn't have the greatest season with a weak OHL team in Guelph Storm. Assuming he'll remain in the OHL next fall, let's see if the centre has a big year to close out his time there.

**31. San Jose Sharks (19-42-9)** The Sharks are loaded with great prospects, many of whom are high picks who have either already landed in the bigs or will be there soon. How about 2023 fourth-rounder Luca Cagnoni, though? The five-foot-nine defenceman is third in AHL scoring from the back end this year, with 47 points in 56 contests as a freshman. He recently got the call to San Jose and recorded his first NHL point in his second game on Saturday.

**32. Chicago Blackhawks (21-42-9)** It's tough right now, no doubt. But the Hawks blueline could look pretty good in a couple years. Artyom Levshunov, the second-overall selection last year, thrived as an AHL rookie and is in Chicago now. He's playing over 20 minutes per night and has four assists in eight games. Meanwhile, big Sam Rinzel — the 25th selection in 2022 who, like Levshunov, is a righty — had a great year that's still going with the NCAA's Golden Gophers. Finally, don't forget about Kevin Korchinski, the seventh pick in 2022. The fact he played in the AHL this year after suiting up in 76 NHL games as a 19-year-old doesn't mean he's hit a wall. There's nothing wrong with a longer development path, especially for a young defenceman.

## [Sportsnet.ca / Best late-season playoff comebacks of the past 20 years](#)

By Rory Boylen – March 28, 2025

Looking at the NHL standings today, several teams -- especially in the East -- on the outside can feel they still have a decent shot of winning their way back into a playoff spot.

But how many truly are still in the running?

With help from SN Stats and the NHL, we're looking at the teams that made the biggest comebacks into a playoff spot within the last 10 games of a regular season in the past 20 years (the salary cap era).

Since 2005-06, 11 teams have qualified for the playoffs after facing a standings deficit of at least three points at any time within their last 10 regular season games. The largest come back within the last 10 games has been from a five-point deficit, which has only been done twice.

Seven teams that are outside of the playoff picture today are now within their final 10 games of the season. More will follow this weekend, so as we approach the 72-game mark for everyone, here's a historical look at who came back from three points or more to make it within the last 10 games, how they did it, and if they had success in the playoffs.

### **FIVE POINTS BACK**

#### **2013-14 Dallas Stars**

**The picture:** With 10 games remaining, the Stars were 34-27-11 and out of a playoff spot by five points. The Arizona Coyotes had possession of the West's second wild card spot with just eight games remaining. There were no other teams between them in the standings.

**The schedule:** Dallas' remaining schedule included six road games and four at home plus three back-to-back situations -- they won the first half of each of those, but lost the back half in two of them. The Stars' record in the last 10 games wasn't especially outstanding, 6-4-0, and they actually lost three of their last five games in regulation.

**The result:** This push had more to do with the Coyotes tripping over themselves. In a seven-game stretch from March 29-April 12, Arizona didn't record any wins and picked up a total of three points in extra-time losses. Interestingly, Dallas and Arizona faced each other in the last game of the regular season, but the Coyotes had fallen off so badly it had no meaning anymore. Arizona won that game 2-1 but finished two points behind the Stars. The Coyotes scored 11 goals in their final eight games; Dallas scored 31 times in their final 10 games and clinched the second wild card position.

In Round 1 of the playoffs, the Stars faced Anaheim, the West's top seed, and lost in six games. Nick Bonino scored the series-clincher for the Ducks in OT.

#### **2023-24 New York Islanders**

**The picture:** With nine games left on their schedule, the Islanders were out of a playoff spot by five points. The Washington Capitals held the second wild card spot and New York had to also climb over Detroit, who were ninth in the conference and sat three points ahead.

**The schedule:** Five of the Islanders' final nine games were at home and they had just one occasion in which they had to play on back-to-back nights. They won both of those games. In fact, the Islanders won seven of their last eight games and the one loss they did record was in a shootout against the Rangers, so they still picked up a point.

**The result:** New York took control of its own destiny with how hot they ended the season, but they didn't just squeak into the final playoff spot, they climbed into the Metropolitan Division's third seed. That's partly because the Capitals stumbled a bit -- they lost four games in a row to start April -- and the Philadelphia Flyers stumbled a lot. The Flyers lost eight games in a row from March 24-April 9, six of which were in regulation. By the time the season ended the Flyers had fallen all the way to 11th in the East.

The Islanders finished three points clear of Washington and faced the Metro's second seed, Carolina, in the first round. New York lost the first three games of the series, won Game 4 in double OT, and then dropped Game 5 by a 6-3 score.

## **FOUR POINTS BACK**

### **2005-06 San Jose Sharks**

**The picture:** With 10 games remaining on their schedule, the Sharks were four points out of the last playoff spot in the West and coming off back-to-back losses in regulation. There were no other teams between San Jose and the eight-ranked Edmonton Oilers.

This was back before the wild card, when the top eight teams in each conference made the playoffs. There were also three divisions in each conference at this time, and each division winner was guaranteed a top three seed for the playoffs.

**The schedule:** The Sharks, who had games in hand of everyone in front of them, finished with a busy schedule -- 10 games in 17 days, five at home and five on the road. They were also subjected to three back-to-back situations and were a perfect 6-0 in those games. In fact, the only two games San Jose lost in April were the first (an OT loss they earned a point in) and the last (a shutout loss in regulation after the playoffs had easily been clinched).

**The result:** The Sharks rocketed up to second place in their division and fifth place in the Western Conference. There was a tight collection of teams from fifth to ninth heading into the final month, but the Sharks' strong finish meant they were seven points clear of the cut-off line. Each of the teams that finished sixth to ninth in the West that year ended the season with between nine and 12 points over their final 10 games, but the biggest loser were the Vancouver Canucks. When April began, Vancouver was seventh and five points clear of the Sharks, but a 4-4-2 finish saw them miss out of the post-season by three points.

San Jose played Nashville in the first round and, after losing Game 1, won the next four in a row and advanced to the second round. There, San Jose faced Edmonton, the eighth seed that had just knocked off the Presidents' Trophy-winning Detroit Red Wings. San Jose won the first two games of this series, then dropped the next four in a row and were eliminated by an Oilers team that went on a Cinderella run to the Stanley Cup Final.

### **2007-08 Washington Capitals**

**The picture:** Another season in which the three division winners were guaranteed a top three seed in each conference and the top eight overall made the playoffs, Washington headed into its final 10 games four points behind Philadelphia for the eighth and final spot. Buffalo sat between them, three points ahead of Washington. Carolina, meantime, was five points up on Washington for the division lead.

**The schedule:** The most difficult part of the final stretch of the calendar for the Capitals was a six-game road trip over 12 days, but four of those away games came against division foes. Remember the South(I)east Division? This was one of those seasons where that collection of teams earned the

nickname. Washington won nine of its last 10 games and all seven in which they faced a Southeast Division opponent. They beat Carolina twice in that stretch, which was key to their comeback.

**The result:** The Capitals' run ended up in them taking first place in the Southeast and the third seed in the East with 94 points. That point total was the exact same as Ottawa and Boston, who were the seventh and eighth seeded teams in the conference. Washington faced Philadelphia (an Atlantic Division team at the time) in the first round. The Capitals won Game 1, dropped the next three in a row, then won Games 5 and 6 to set up a Game 7 at home even though the Flyers had one more standings point in the regular season. The Flyers won the game 3-2 in OT on a goal from Joffrey Lupul.

### **2018-19 Colorado Avalanche**

**The picture:** The Avalanche were four points out of the West's second wild card spot when they had 10 games remaining on the schedule in 2019. Arizona held the second wild card spot, but Minnesota and Chicago were also ahead of the Avalanche at the time.

**The schedule:** Colorado ended with five games at home, five on the road and two back-to-back situations, but they also directly faced each of the three teams that were ahead of them. They beat Chicago once in regulation, then lost in OT the next night in a home-and-home; they beat Minnesota in regulation; and they beat Arizona in a shootout.

**The result:** Colorado's 7-1-2 finish made them the second-hottest team heading into the playoffs -- St. Louis was the only team ahead of them and, remember, this was their Stanley Cup winning season where the Blues were last in the NHL on Jan. 1. As for the teams the Avalanche were chasing, Chicago finished 4-4-2, Arizona 3-4-2, and Minnesota 3-6-0 so Colorado blew past each one of them in the final stretch and grabbed the last wild card spot by a comfortable four-point margin.

Colorado faced Calgary in Round 1, the Pacific Division winners and top seed in the West. After the Avalanche lost Game 1, they won the next four in a row, scoring 17 goals in those games, but winning two of them in OT. In Round 2, Colorado faced the San Jose Sharks, who were the No. 2 team in the Pacific and finished with the second-most points in the West. The teams traded wins and losses from Game 1 to Game 7 and each of the final three were decided by one goal. The Avs lost Game 7 by a 3-2 count.

### **2007-08 Nashville Predators**

**The picture:** In the same season as Washington (noted above) made one of these comebacks, Nashville's was the more impressive one because they had to make up a lot of ground in a shorter time frame and didn't have the benefit of a weaker division to clinch a top seed with. The Predators were four points out of the playoffs with just six games remaining. Colorado held the West's eighth seed at the time and Vancouver was seventh with just as many points as the Avalanche, but two games in hand. Edmonton was between those teams and Nashville, just one point up on the Predators.

**The schedule:** The Predators had six games to play over 11 days, with four on the road and one back-to-back situation that came in their final two games. They did have to play on the road in Detroit, 2008's Presidents' Trophy winners, and lost that game 1-0 in OT, but the rest of their games in this stretch came against non-playoff teams. The Predators shut out Columbus twice and beat St. Louis twice as well, both teams that finished in the bottom-six overall that season.

**The result:** Nashville went 4-1-1 in their last run of games, but it was Vancouver's terrible finish that ultimately opened up the door. Colorado finished strong to stay ahead of the Predators and Edmonton finished 2-2-1. The Canucks, meantime, lost seven of their last eight games and fell all the way to 11th (by tiebreaker) in the West.



The Predators' reward was to face the buzzsaw Detroit Red Wings, but they made a series out of it. After losing Games 1 and 2 on the road, the Predators won Games 3 and 4 at home, then dropped Game 5 in OT. Detroit came back to Nashville and won Game 6 by a 3-0 score, beginning a run that ended with a Stanley Cup victory.

### **2006-07 New York Islanders**

**The picture:** On April 4, 2007 the New York Islanders were three points out of the last playoff spot in the East with just three games remaining. Montreal held the seventh spot at 90 points, Toronto was eighth at 89 points, while the Islanders and Hurricanes sat at 86 points. New York had one game in hand of each of those teams.

Eleven days prior the Islanders were looking pretty good, tied for the eighth seed with Montreal and Carolina, and two points up on 10th place Toronto. A four-game losing skid followed (three in regulation) which put them on the back foot in the last stretch.

The schedule: New York's last three games were at home to Toronto, and on the road in Philadelphia (the last overall team that season) and New Jersey (the Atlantic Division winner).

**The result:** The Islanders won all three of their remaining games to slide past both Toronto and Montreal for the eighth seed. While the Maple Leafs' and Canadiens' seasons concluded on the Saturday, the Islanders had one more game on Sunday, April 8 and came into the day with 90 points, one behind Toronto who was in eighth place. The Islanders won 3-2 in New Jersey via shootout to dramatically clinch the final spot. They faced the East's top seed, Buffalo, in the first round of the playoffs and lost in five games, though three of them were decided by a single goal.

### **THREE POINTS BACK**

### **2018-19 Columbus Blue Jackets**

The picture: With eight games remaining, the Columbus Blue Jackets were three points behind Montreal for the second wild card spot and had a game in hand. Columbus was also dealing with a three-game losing streak at the time, while the Canadiens had won three in a row.

The schedule: Five of Columbus' last eight games were on the road and they had two back-to-back situations that were all away games. The Blue Jackets won all five of their road games and immediately snapped that three-game losing streak with a five-game winning streak.

The result: Columbus' 7-1-0 finish was enough to pull away from the Canadiens. In fact, after Montreal lost 2-1 in their second-last game of the season, Columbus clinched a spot with a 3-2 shootout win in their second-last regular season game, so this didn't even come down to the very end.

This was the season in which Columbus made two very high-risk calls at the trade deadline by keeping pending UFAs Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky, who had signalled their intention to leave. The Blue Jackets kept them as own-rentals instead of selling for future assets and were rewarded not just with a playoff appearance, but with one of the great upsets of the salary cap era. Columbus drew the Presidents' Trophy-winning Tampa Bay Lightning in Round 1, who finished with 21 more points than anyone else. Columbus swept them away and outscored the Lightning 19-8.

In Round 2, Columbus faced Boston, but after holding a 2-1 series lead the Blue Jackets lost three in a row, getting eliminated in a shutout loss in Game 6.

### **2022-23 Florida Panthers**

**The picture:** Things were trending badly for the Panthers. They had dropped four games in a row, all in regulation, and lost goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky to an injury that would keep him out for the rest of the

regular season. With eight games left they were three points behind Pittsburgh for the second wild card spot in the East and had played one more game than the Pens.

**The schedule:** Four of Florida's last eight games were at home and the only back-to-back they had came right at the end of March at the beginning of this stretch. They didn't face the team they were trailing at all.

**The result:** Alex Lyon was thrust into the starter's role with 32 games of NHL experience to that point and just eight games played that season. His first challenge: tackling both ends of a back-to-back against Toronto and Montreal. He won both of them, which began a six-game winning streak that got the Panthers back in control of the race.

With two games remaining, the Panthers now held the seventh seed -- tied with the Islanders in points but ahead of them by way of the tiebreaker. They were also one point ahead of the Penguins behind them. Florida lost its second-last game in OT, earning one point, which opened the door back up for Pittsburgh. However, in Pittsburgh's second-last game of the season, they dropped a 5-2 decision at home to the 31st overall Chicago Blackhawks, which clinched the playoffs for Florida with one game remaining since they were up on Pittsburgh by two points and couldn't be passed in the tie-breaker.

That Pittsburgh loss to Chicago changed the fortune of a starved franchise in a huge way. The Panthers finished eighth in the East after losing their last game of the season. They fell behind 3-1 in their opening round series against Boston, then won three in a row to knock off the Presidents' Trophy winners who won a record 65 games that season. The Panthers eliminated Toronto in five games, swept Carolina in the conference final, and lost in five games to Vegas in the Stanley Cup Final. But that playoff run put the Panthers on the map and they'd build on the momentum into a Stanley Cup win the following season.

### **2012-13 Detroit Red Wings**

**The picture:** In a lockout-shortened season, the Red Wings had four games remaining and, after losing five of their past six (three in extra time), trailed Minnesota (seventh) and Columbus (eighth) by three points in the final week of the regular season. The Red Wings had a game in hand of Minnesota and two on Columbus.

**The schedule:** Detroit had four games in six days, but three of them were at home. There was one back-to-back situation but both games were at home. Three of their opponents (Dallas, Arizona and Nashville) missed the playoffs that season.

**The result:** The Red Wings controlled their destiny and forced the issue by winning all four of their final games, allowing a total of just three goals against. Neither of their opponents finished terribly either -- Minnesota won two of its final three games, while Columbus won both of its last two games. In the end, Detroit edged them both out by a point for seventh, while the Wild claimed the eighth seed over Columbus by way of the tiebreaker.

This was Detroit's first season in the post-Nicklas Lidstrom era, and they drew Anaheim in Round 1, who recorded 10 more points than Detroit in the 48-game season. Detroit trailed the series 3-2, won Game 6 in OT and took the series in Game 7 by a 3-2 score. In Round 2, Detroit took a 3-1 series lead on the Presidents' Trophy-winning Chicago Blackhawks, then lost the next three and were eliminated. The Blackhawks went on to win the Stanley Cup, while Detroit hasn't won a playoff series since.

### **2014-15 Ottawa Senators**

**The picture:** With four games left on their schedule and 92 points in the standings, the Ottawa Senators were ninth in the East and trailed Boston, Detroit and Pittsburgh, who all had 95 points. The Senators

had been running hot for a while, though. This was the famous "Hamburglar" run and Andrew Hammond had won 12 of his past 13 games heading into the final week of the regular season.

**The schedule:** Over a seven-day period, the Senators faced three road games but no back-to-back situations. They would directly face one of the teams in front of them (Pittsburgh), but only one of their opponents (the Rangers) was a playoff team that season.

**The result:** The Senators actually started the week with a loss, 3-2 in a shootout against Toronto, which was one of just three over a 23-game span for Hammond. However, the Senators won each of their last three games and ultimately finished in the East's first wild card spot ahead of the Penguins. Boston lost each of its last three games and were the team left out. When Hammond started his first game of the season on Feb. 18, Ottawa was 23rd in the league and trailed the Bruins by 12 standings points. Hammond went 20-1-2 the rest of the way.

Ottawa drew Montreal in Round 1 and after Hammond lost the first two starts, the Senators turned back to Craig Anderson, who lost Game 3. Anderson earned a shutout in a Game 4 win, allowed just one goal in a Game 5 win, but Ottawa dropped Game 6 by a 2-0 score.