



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
November 5-6, 2024**

Columbus Blue Jackets

- PAGE 02: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets turn up the heat at practice following blowout losses
- PAGE 04: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets vs San Jose Sharks score today: Live NHL updates, highlights
- PAGE 11: The Athletic: Blue Jackets confront structure and work ethic issues after rough weekend
- PAGE 13: BlueJackets.com: Small Business of the Month: De Santis Florists
- PAGE 14: BlueJackets.com: Christiansen has earned his spot with the Blue Jackets
- PAGE 16: BlueJackets.com: Blue Jackets battle back to earn a point in San Jose
- PAGE 18: The Athletic: Are payment deferrals the new big thing in NHL contracts? What execs, agents say
- PAGE 21: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Sillinger, Merzlikins, Johnson & More
- PAGE 24: 1st Ohio Battery: Game Day #12: Elvis in Net as Blue Jackets Look to get Back to Basics Tuesday Night as California Road Trip Begins in San Jose.
- PAGE 28: 1st Ohio Battery: After Toughest Test to Date, Blue Jackets Face Another Tough Challenge Out West

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

NHL/ Websites

- PAGE 30: The Athletic: NHL Playoff Report: Wild and Capitals on the rise, Predators and Bruins falling off
- PAGE 34: The Athletic: 4 Nations Face-Off rosters: Projecting each team's lineup — and the toughest calls
- PAGE 36: The Athletic: Weekend NHL rankings: Playoff outsiders I still believe in, at least for now
- PAGE 40: ESPN: What's at stake as NHL and NHLPA begin collective bargaining agreement talks?
- PAGE 44: ESPN: Canada's toughest roster decisions for 4 Nations Face-Off
- PAGE 48: Sportsnet.ca: How high-profile NHL off-season acquisitions are faring with new clubs

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets turn up the heat at practice following blowout losses

By Brian Hedger- November 5, 2024

The Blue Jackets have pushed the reset button.

After large margins of defeat in back-to-back losses to the Winnipeg Jets and Washington Capitals, the Jackets returned to practice Monday at Nationwide Arena. After a pointed video breakdown of what happened during losses that resulted in a combined 13-4 loss margin, the Jackets shifted their focus forward — and westward — to a four-game road trip that starts Tuesday in San Jose.

The coaching staff, led by head coach Dean Evason, turned up the intensity with a couple of high-volume tongue lashings and sharp commentaries during a demanding 45-minute practice.

“It was worse (rewatching the video),” Evason said. “There’s going to be mistakes, but we could’ve corrected it or helped alleviate that scoring chance by working, and we didn’t. That’s not who we’ve been and that’s not who we’re going to be going forward. So, we had to have a little adjustment today.”

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan (23) skates between Winnipeg Jets left wing Kyle Connor (81) and Winnipeg Jets center Gabriel Vilardi (13) during the first period at Nationwide Arena on November 1, 2024 in Columbus, Ohio.

It’s still early in the NHL’s 82-game season, so the Blue Jackets are hovering around .500 at 5-5-1, which means they’re still fifth in the Metropolitan Division with an upcoming slate against teams that aren’t quite as imposing as the Jets and Capitals. It begins with the San Jose Sharks, who are 3-8-2 with a minus-18 goal differential. Addressing what happened in the past two games was essential in the Jackets’ transformation process into a legitimate playoff contender.

“The guys know that we, as a coaching staff ... there’s no gray,” Evason said. “It’s black and white. It’s just, ‘This is what happened.’ We watched every goal this morning, and it’s not calling guy out. It’s teaching, it’s learning and it’s being accountable. If you’re on six of those clips, so be it. You’re the one that’s going to teach us how not to do things that were done in order to allow teams to score on us.”

Columbus Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason talks to his team during the second period of the NHL hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Monday, Oct. 28, 2024.

The Sharks lost 3-2 to the Vancouver Canucks on Saturday after winning their previous three games, so they’re playing better since dropping nine games during an poor start. The game Tuesday, however, should be a chance for the Blue Jackets to get back on track.

“We learned from it today, and we move on from it now,” defenseman Zach Werenski said. “It’s pretty simple. We watched video on it, our mistakes, we had a hard practice and now we move on from it and get ready for San Jose. We played two good teams. That’s no excuse for how we played those games, but I think it exposed what could happen when you’re not playing your game, and you’re not playing hard enough.”

Winnipeg Jets center Cole Perfetti (91), Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8), Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Mikael Pyyhtia (82) and Winnipeg Jets left wing Nikolaj Ehlers (27) watch the action during the first period at Nationwide Arena on November 1, 2024 in Columbus, Ohio.

The Blue Jackets will also get three days in Southern California before another back-to-back Saturday and Sunday against the Los Angeles Kings (6-3-3) and Anaheim Ducks (4-5-2). The Kings are constructed to

play a style similar to Winnipeg and Washington, while Anaheim is almost a mirror image of Columbus. The trip concludes next week with a game Tuesday against the Seattle Kraken (5-7-1), who have the same point total as the Blue Jackets (11) after two more games.

Should they right the ship, it's a trip that could buoy the Jackets' chances of surprising the NHL by remaining in the early playoff picture in the Eastern Conference.

"It's a long season," center Sean Monahan said. "You're not going to forget about (the last two games). You've got to remember what it feels like and remember that style of play doesn't give you success. When you look at the video we watched as a team, it shows that it's a direct correlation of not working and not doing the things we did earlier in the year to have success."

Oct 15, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Kent Johnson (91) skates on the ice in the third period during the home opener at Nationwide Arena on Tuesday.

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Kent Johnson returns to skating

Following the Blue Jackets' practice Monday, injured forward Kent Johnson geared up for a solo workout at the Ice Haus while rehabbing and recovering from a shoulder injury.

After seeing specialists, Johnson will avoid another shoulder surgery to repair damage from tripping over teammate James van Riemsdyk in the fourth game of the season. Evason didn't have any update about Johnson, whose return to skating was news to him.

Evason didn't say whether Johnson will make the trip out West with the Blue Jackets or remain in Columbus to keep skating on his own. The Blue Jackets are planning to have "team building" activities during off days Wednesday and Thursday in the L.A. area, but Evason also declined to elaborate on what that entailed.

Oct 22, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Kevin Labanc (62) tries to take the puck from Toronto Maple Leafs center John Tavares (91) during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena.

Columbus Blue Jackets' Kevin Labanc 'excited' for return to San Jose

This is Kevin Labanc's ninth NHL season and first not playing for the Sharks, which makes his first return trip to San Jose with an opposing team a little weird. He's trying to remain focused on helping the Blue Jackets right themselves more than his feelings about facing his former team for the first time.

"I'm just going to try and keep it as simple as possible, and just go in there with the mindset to just get two points and not make it too emotional," Labanc said. "It's going to be exciting. I know a lot of the guys over there. I'd been there for eight years, so that's where I started as a kid and came out of there as a man. I'm excited to go there and play against them."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets vs San Jose Sharks score today: Live NHL updates, highlights

By Brian Hedger- November 6, 2024

Despite outplaying the San Jose Sharks while outshooting them by nearly double, the Blue Jackets' winless skid stretches to three straight with a 2-1 overtime loss late Tuesday night at SAP Center. The OT loss starts the Jackets' four-game western road trip with a sour taste, especially seeing former center Alex Wennberg net the winning goal past Elvis Merzlikins in overtime.

Kirill Marchenko scored the lone goal for the Blue Jackets (5-6-1), who got 25 saves on 27 shots from Merzlikins. Vitek Vanecek improves to 7-0-0 all-time against Columbus with a career-high 50-save goaltending gem for the Sharks (4-8-2).

Here's game preview information, updates and analysis:

FINAL: San Jose Sharks 2, Columbus Blue Jackets 1

Alex Wennberg sticks his former team with a vexing, frustrating loss in overtime on a great individual effort. After springing himself into the slot past the Blue Jackets' defense, he ripped a wrist shot over Merzlikins' glove and under the crossbar near the far side corner of the net to end it at 3:11 of OT, rewarding Vanecek for basically stealing the Sharks the second point.

Overtime: Columbus Blue Jackets 1, San Jose Sharks 1

Another impressive penalty-kill thwarted the Fantilli penalty late, paving the way for Merzlikins to help earn at least a point for the effort tonight beyond regulation. Time for OT to see who gets the second point. The Jackets outshot the Sharks by nearly double, 49-25, in regulation.

3rd period, 16:01: Columbus Blue Jackets facing key penalty kill

Fantilli hauls down William Eklund right in front of the Columbus net, putting San Jose on the power play late in the third in a tied game that's only tied because of Vanecek's excellent in the Sharks' net.

3rd period, 9:17: Columbus Blue Jackets 1, San Jose Sharks 1

Kirill Marchenko finally cracks the ice against Vanecek, scoring to tie it after scooping the rebound of Severson's slapper and stuffing it into the net past the sprawled Sharks goalie. That was a big one. It was also Marchenko's fifth goal and team-high 13th point this season (12 games).

3rd period, 8:06: San Jose Sharks 1, Columbus Blue Jackets 0

Vanecek is playing like he smells his first career shutout against the Blue Jackets along with a 7-0-0 career record against them. He's stopping everything Columbus throws at him, including the proverbial kitchen sink. His last three were saves against Kevin Labanc from the right circle, James van Riemsdyk from the doorstep and Damon Severson off a rebound from the low slot.

3rd period, first TV stoppage: San Jose Sharks, Columbus Blue Jackets

More of the same to start the third period, as the Blue Jackets continue to pepper Vanecek and the Sharks' goalie easily turned all shots aside. Columbus could stand to get the puck into the middle third of the ice for more shots and scoring chances, though.

3rd period start: San Jose Sharks 1, Columbus Blue Jackets 0

There's one regular period left to play, and the puck is down in San Jose for the Blue Jackets and Sharks. Score favors San Jose by a goal.

2nd intermission: San Jose Sharks 1, Columbus Blue Jackets 0

The Blue Jackets outshot the Sharks 17-11 in the second and have a commanding 30-17 edge in shots through the first two periods. They just don't have a goal thanks to another outstanding goaltending effort against them by Vitek Vanacek, who has a long history of frustrating the Blue Jackets.

If there's good news for the Jackets other than the shot total, it's that it could be 2-0 San Jose if not for the overturned Grundstrom goal for a missed offside.

2nd period, 18:49: San Jose Sharks 1, Columbus Blue Jackets 0

The Sharks do get the game's first goal this time, as Jack Thompson nets his first career NHL goal with 1:11 left in the second period off a beautiful no-look, cross-ice feed from Will Smith for a one-timer just as a San Jose power play expired. The pass set Thompson up with an easy shot into a wide opening on the far side of the net.

Merzlikins had no chance to stop it after committing to the near post to defend against Smith possibly shooting from the right circle.

2nd period, 11:30: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, San Jose Sharks 0

Another good penalty kill for the Blue Jackets absolves defenseman Ivan Provorov for taking a bad interference penalty in his own zone to give the Sharks a power play while they were already seizing control of the game at even strength. Let's see if the Jackets can get some momentum from their kill to flip the ice a bit.

2nd period, 7:54: San Jose Sharks have Grundstrom goal overturned

It looked like the Sharks took a 1-0 lead on a five-hole shot by Carl Grundstrom, but the Blue Jackets challenged the entry play for offside. Replays showed Grundstrom entered the zone just offside, negating what would've been his first goal of the season.

Elvis cracked first in the goaltending duel, but he gets a reprieve and it's back to 0-0.

2nd period, 5:29: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, San Jose Sharks 0

Merzlikins has to come up big again to keep it 0-0, making four saves in the span of 18 seconds, including two on great looks for Celebrini wrist shots before the Jackets' goalie could get a stoppage.

2nd period start: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, San Jose Sharks 0

The puck is in play for the start of the second period out in San Jose, where the Blue Jackets are still looking for a way to get pucks past Vitek Vanacek. The Sharks goalie made stops on all 13 shots he faced in the first period, after coming into the game with a 6-0-0 record, 1.66 goals-against average and .942 save percentage in six career games against Columbus.

1st intermission: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, San Jose Sharks 0

All in all, score that period for the Blue Jackets despite the lack of a goal either way. They outshot the Sharks 13-6 with the aid of two power plays and controlled the puck at even-strength more than San Jose. The bad news is that Vitek Vanacek is doing what he always does against the Blue Jackets, who've never beaten him in six career games.

According to Natural Stat Trick's tallies, Columbus has the edges in Corsi (20-11), Fenwick (13-10), shots on goal (8-6) and scoring chances (7-4). High-danger chances were even (2-2).

Late 1st period: Columbus Blue Jackets impress in first penalty kill

Mathieu Olivier getting sent to the penalty box for interference put the Jackets' penalty-kill units on the ice for the first time. They performed well, killing the two-minute infraction without allowing a shot on goal. Jake Christiansen, Zach Werenski, Mikael Pyyhtia and Sean Monahan were the last PK group on the ice when Olivier was sprung from the box. It remains 0-0.

1st period, 10:42: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, San Jose Sharks 0

Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins gets his first big test of the game, courtesy of Alex Wennberg. The former Blue Jackets' center set up defenseman Cody Ceci with a great look from the high slot that made Merzlikins to stop his wrister with a leg pad, then scramble to stop a second long wrister by Mario Ferraro from the opposite side of the high slot. Merzlikins wasn't as busy as Vanecek to start this game, but he's heavily involved now.

1st period, 6:04: Columbus Blue Jackets 0, San Jose 0

The Blue Jackets peppered Vitek Vanecek during 4-on-4 after Macklin Celebrini (holding) and David Jiricek (interference) were sent off for offsetting minors. The problem is that Vanecek has a long history of frustrating Columbus, which was noted earlier in this blog roll. See below. He stopped all three shots thrown his way during 4-on-4 and went 6-for-6 to open the game.

Early 1st period: Columbus Blue Jackets fail on game's first power play

The Jackets got a friendly call barely a minute into the game when Sharks newly acquired defenseman Timothy Liljegren was called for tripping Sean Monahan. The Blue Jackets generated good time with the puck inside the San Jose zone, but only got one shot on goal.

Kirill Marchenko could've taken an open ome-timer from the left circle early in the power play, but attempted a cross-ice pass that was intercepted in the slot and cleared. He's got to shoot that one. It stays 0-0 early.

Game start: Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks

The puck is down at SAP Center in San Jose, where the Blue Jackets are seeking a strong rebound from a rough weekend back-to-back sweep.

Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks: starters, lineups

Blue Jackets starters

Forward line 3: Dmitri Voronkov - Justin Danforth - Mathieu Olivier

Defense pairing 1: Zach Werenski - Ivan Provorov

Goalie: Elvis Merzlikins

Sharks starters

Forward line 3: Barclay Goodrow - Will Smith - Luke Kunin

Defense pairing 1: Mario Ferraro - Cody Ceci

Goalie: Vitek Vanecek

Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks goaltending matchup

Columbus: Elvis Merzlikins will hop back between the pipes for the Blue Jackets after backing up Daniil Tarasov on Saturday in Washington to conclude the Jackets' ugly back-to-back losses. Merzlikins was tagged for six goals Friday in a 6-2 loss to the Winnipeg Jets, but was outstanding in his previous three outings. That included a 2-0 shutout of the New York Islanders on Thursday at Nationwide Arena. Merzlikins is 2-3-0 in five appearances with a 2.86 goals-against average, .907 save percentage and one shutout.

San Jose: Vanecek is getting the net after backing up MacKenzie Blackwood the past two games. After dropping four of his first five appearances to start this season, Vanecek earned a win in his most recent action last Tuesday against the Los Angeles Kings. Vanecek, who's 1-4-0 with a 3.65 GAA and .879 save percentage, has never lost to the Blue Jackets. He's 6-0-0 against Columbus with a sterling 1.66 GAA and blistering .942 save percentage.

Columbus Blue Jackets lineup at San Jose Sharks

Here's how the Blue Jackets are expected to start out tonight at SAP Center:

Forward lines

Yegor Chinakhov — Sean Monahan — Kirill Marchenko

Cole Sillinger — Adam Fantilli — Mikael Pyyhtia

Dmitri Voronkov — Justin Danforth — Mathieu Olivier

James van Riemsdyk — Sean Kuraly — Kevin Labanc

Defense pairings

Zach Werenski — Ivan Provorov

Jake Christiansen — Damon Severson

Jack Johnson — David Jiricek

Goalies

Elvis Merzlikins

Daniil Tarasov

Scratched: D Jordan Harris, F Zach Aston-Reese

Injured: F Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery), D Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery), F Kent Johnson (shoulder) and F Gavin Brindley (fractured finger)

San Jose Sharks lineup vs Columbus Blue Jackets

Forward lines

Mikael Granlund — Macklin Celebrini — Tyler Toffoli

William Eklund — Alex Wennberg — Fabian Zetterlund

Barclay Goodrow — Will Smith — Luke Kunin

Carl Grundstrom — Nico Sturm — Ty Dellandrea

Defense pairings

Mario Ferraro — Cody Ceci

Jack Thompson — Jan Rutta

Henry Thrun — Timothy Lilgren

Goalies

Vitek Vanecek

MacKenzie Blackwood

Scratched: F Givani Smith, D Jake Walman

Injured: C Logan Couture (lower body), D Lucas Carlsson (undisclosed), D Marc-Edourd Vlasic (back)

Macklin Celebrini to play for San Jose Sharks vs Columbus Blue Jackets

The Sharks are getting some offensive back into their top line with the return of rookie center Macklin Celebrini, the first overall pick in the 2024 NHL Draft. Celebrini sustained a hip injury during a preseason game, aggravated it during San Jose's season-opener and hasn't played since — missing the previous 12 games.

Despite playing through the injury, Celebrini notched his first NHL goal plus an assist for a two-point game in his NHL debut during a 5-4 overtime loss Oct. 10 to the St. Louis Blues. Celebrini will center San Jose's top forward line, skating with Mikael Granlund and Tyler Toffoli as wingers.

Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks history

All-time record: The Blue Jackets are 28-34-5 in 67 games against the Sharks, including 10-21-2 at SAP Center. The Blue Jackets swept the two-game series last season, winning 4-3 on Feb. 17 in San Jose and 4-2 on March 16 at Nationwide Arena.

Last meeting: The Blue Jackets got a sterling performance in net from Daniil Tarasov, who made 39 saves on 41 shots to earn the goaltending win. Johnny Gaudreau (goal, two assists) and Alexander Nylander (two goals, assist) each had three points to lead the way offensively.

2024 matchups: Nov. 5 in San Jose; Jan. 16 in Columbus

Who are the officials for Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks?

Referee: Kendrick Nicholson (30)

Referee: Justin Kea (36)

Lines official: Shandor Alphonso (52)

Lines official: Jonathan Deschamps (80)

Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks betting odds

Game lines and odds from BetMGM as of Tuesday, Nov. 5

Spread: Blue Jackets (-1.5)

Over/under: 6.5

Moneyline: Blue Jackets -130, Islanders +110

Columbus Blue Jackets news

Blue Jackets notes: coaching staff sends a message

3 takeaways from the Blue Jackets' flop in D.,C.

Capitals jump out early, rout Blue Jackets

3 takeaways from the Blue Jackets' humbling loss to Winnipeg

Blue Jackets crumble under Jets' pressure

Blue Jackets take stride with grinding win over Islanders

Routing the McDavid-less Oilers: 3 takeaways

Reviewing how the Blue Jackets blew out the Edmonton Oilers

Kent Johnson hopes to return this season with rehab, no shoulder surgery

Columbus Blue Jackets November 2024 schedule, record

Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' schedule for November, along with start times, television, and radio information of upcoming games:

Friday, Nov. 1: Blue Jackets vs Winnipeg Jets (L, 6-2); Takeaways; Photos

Saturday, Nov. 2: Blue Jackets at Capitals (L, 7-2); Takeaways

Tuesday, Nov. 5: Blue Jackets at Sharks | 10:30 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Saturday, Nov. 9: Blue Jackets at Kings | 9 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Sunday, Nov. 10: Blue Jackets at Ducks | 8 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Tuesday, Nov. 12: Blue Jackets at Kraken | 10 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Friday, Nov. 15: Blue Jackets vs Penguins | 7 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 93.3 The Bus

Saturday, Nov. 16: Blue Jackets at Canadiens | 7 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Monday, Nov. 18: Blue Jackets at Boston Bruins | 7 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Thursday, Nov. 21: Blue Jackets vs Lightning | 7 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Saturday, Nov. 23: Blue Jackets vs Hurricanes | 7 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Wednesday, Nov. 27: Blue Jackets vs Canadiens | 7:30 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 97.1 The Fan

Friday, Nov. 29: Blue Jackets vs Calgary Flames | 3 p.m. | FanDuel Sports Network Ohio | 93.3 The Bus

November Record: 0-2-0, 5th place, Metropolitan Division

Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks records

Records: Blue Jackets 5-5-1, 11 points, 5th place in the Metropolitan Division; Sharks 3-8-2, 8 points, 8th place in the Pacific Division

How can I watch or listen to Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks?

TV channel: FanDuel Sports Network Ohio

Streaming: ESPN+; FanDuel Sports Network app

Radio: 97.1 The Fan; Blue Jackets website, Blue Jackets app

Columbus Blue Jackets at San Jose Sharks start time

Date: Tuesday, Nov. 5

Time: 10:30 p.m.

Location: SAP Center (San Jose, Calif.)

The Athletic / Blue Jackets confront structure and work ethic issues after rough weekend

By Aaron Portzline- November 6, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Those who have watched the Columbus Blue Jackets closely in recent seasons probably came out of weekend losses to the Winnipeg Jets and Washington Capitals with a pointed question rattling around their noggins.

Were those ugly losses — the Jets buried the Jackets 6-2 at home on Friday, the Capitals routed them 7-2 in Washington, D.C., only 24 hours later — a hiccup or a harbinger?

It was no surprise coach Dean Evason took a different tone Monday, raising his voice repeatedly during a high-paced, 45-minute practice before the Blue Jackets boarded a plane and flew to northern California for the start of four games out west.

Evason was even more disappointed after watching film of the two losses than he was having witnessed them from the bench, especially the loss in Washington. The Jackets were down 5-0 after one period and allowed their work ethic to sag.

“We made structural mistakes, and then we compounded it with a lack of effort,” Evason said. “You saw today’s practice. We try to home in on both of those.

“There are going to be mistakes. But we could have corrected it or helped alleviate that scoring chance by working, and we didn’t. That’s not who we’ve been and that’s not who we’re going to be moving forward. So we had to have a little adjustment today.”

The Blue Jackets are 5-5-1. They were 4-4-2 last season when a November freefall — they were 0-7-2 from Nov. 4-19 — effectively sapped the season of all competitive interest.

If there is one topic universally despised in the dressing room, it’s the past two seasons. On Monday, Blue Jackets players insisted they know how the wheels came off against Winnipeg and Washington and that they know how to reattach them.

The Blue Jackets play the San Jose Sharks at 10:30 p.m. Tuesday in SAP Center.

“We played two good teams, but there’s no excuse for how we played in those games,” Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. “It kind of exposed what happens when we’re not playing our game and when we’re not playing hard enough. We’re a team that prides ourselves on work ethic, and if we’re not going to do that, we’re not going to win games. Now we know what happens when we play that way.”

added an extra point because why not pic.twitter.com/gzDPposNIA

— Washington Capitals (@Capitals) November 2, 2024

Monday was not an easy day at the rink, but it felt productive.

Before the Blue Jackets practiced, they held a team meeting and a video review session. Evason seems to approach film review much like former Jackets coach John Tortorella did — nothing personal, but no feelings spared, either.

You don’t want to be the star of that movie.

“The guys know that with our coaching staff, there’s no gray,” Evason said. There’s black and white, this is what happened. We watched every goal this morning, and it’s not calling guys out. We’ve established right away that it’s teaching, it’s learning and it’s being accountable.

“If you’re on six of those clips, so be it. You’re the one who’s going to teach us how not to do the things that were done that allowed a team to score on us.”

It’s important to remember the Blue Jackets’ veteran players had a hand in Evason landing in Columbus this summer. Not directly, of course. GM Don Waddell handled those duties. But he spoke with players about what had gone on in years past, and what they felt they needed from the new coach.

Almost unanimously it was made clear they wanted a veteran coach who would push them and demand more of them, even when it made them, at times, uncomfortable. Yes, some of the players who have been around long enough actually came to miss Tortorella.

Werenski would have been one of those players consulted.

“I actually enjoyed (the film review),” Werenski said. “If you don’t enjoy that, if you don’t enjoy learning and watching the mistakes you made that hurt the team, you’re in the wrong business. I think that’s what every team needs, and it was great today.

“The practice had a lot of pace, a lot of battles. It was probably the most intense we’ve had (under Evason).”

The Blue Jackets should not be overwhelmed playing against the San Jose Sharks (3-8-2), who are one or two seasons behind Columbus in deciding to rebuild their roster. Then, after a three-day break from games, they’ll play Los Angeles, Anaheim and Seattle in a four-day span to end the trip.

Obviously, the Blue Jackets are in no position to look past anybody. But mostly they’re looking inward, hoping to stem the tide quickly. They’ve allowed 13 goals the past two games.

“They’ve said all the right things and now the execution has to happen,” Evason said. “I know that with our group, up to this point ... the accountability factor is there.

“They do realize that when we do not play with good structure, and when we don’t make up for our mistakes with our effort or work, we’re going to give up the goals we’ve given up.”

Evason wasn’t here last season, and he doesn’t have much sense for the Blue Jackets’ recent struggles. They’ve missed the playoffs the past four seasons, and in the past two they’ve been out of it before U.S. Thanksgiving.

That’s why last weekend was unnerving.

“The biggest thing is, we know why,” Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger said. “We know why it went that way. We know what we have to do to stop that and not get in that trend of a downward spiral.”

[BlueJackets.com / Small Business of the Month: De Santis Florists](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- November 5, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets are excited to partner with First Merchants Bank to recognize small businesses in our community. Each month throughout the season, one company will be featured as the Small Business of the Month presented by First Merchants Bank. October's Small Business of the Month is De Santis Florists.

If you go to De Santis Florists, you know you're going to work with a De Santis.

Open since 1927, it's a fourth-generation small business located in the northwest side of Columbus on Kenny Road, and every day Matt De Santis has to opportunity to go to work alongside his daughter, Caroline.

"I'm so proud that I have a child that's doing the same thing I do," Matt said. "It makes it special. We're right next to each other, just like I was with my dad. I worked across from my dad for probably 20 years."

Not that Caroline exactly expected things to turn out that way.

"It's pretty crazy," Caroline said. "If you asked me when I was younger, I would have said no way, but now I love it and I can't imagine working anywhere else. When I was in high school, that's when I really started to work there, and now I just can't see myself doing anything else. I took over the wedding aspect of everything, and I love it."

While Caroline noted wedding arrangements are her favorite part of the job, De Santis offers flowers for any circumstance. In addition to wedding bouquets, centerpieces and other services, De Santis offers sympathy flowers for funerals, bouquets for occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries and more, as well as congratulatory pieces for such occasions as graduations and newborn babies. The company also offers same-day delivery throughout the Columbus area.

The chance to be creative is the best part of the job, Caroline said, and it's clearly working. The shop has long been a trusted source for Columbus residents for floral needs, with the business's 100th anniversary just a few years away.

"We're pushing for that 100, that's for sure," Matt said.

Recognized as the First Merchants Small Business of the Month for October, De Santis staff members were able to attend and be recognized at the Blue Jackets' game Oct. 28 against Edmonton.

"It's been incredible," Caroline said. "Everybody has been so welcoming. We love the Jackets, so it's been pretty cool just how nice everything has been."

[BlueJackets.com / Christiansen has earned his spot with the Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- November 5, 2024

To put it mildly, Jake Christiansen knows his way up and down Interstate 71.

Three seasons ago, he made his NHL debut with the Blue Jackets and played in eight games while skating in 62 contests with the team's AHL affiliate in Cleveland. In 2022-23, he played a career-best 24 NHL games and 50 more with the Monsters; last year, he had 12 games in Columbus and 62 in Cleveland, where he was an AHL All-Star.

For the entirety of that time, he was seemingly on the bubble of sticking with the Blue Jackets, but it just never seemed to happen. But along the way, the defenseman kept his spirits up and just kept working on his game.

"I think you learn so much from every call-up, every send down, every game in the AHL and so forth," Christiansen said. "There are so many things I've learned along the way, and my game has changed a lot from the first time I got my chances in the NHL. It's hard to name one because it's been four years of continuous learning.

"You never give up, obviously. Just keep working hard, because there were times there where I would get sent down for the third, fourth, fifth time. It could be a little discouraging, but you just learn through it. It'll all work out if you keep grinding and keep working on your game and getting better."

Through 11 games of the Blue Jackets season, it's fair to say it has worked out for the 25-year-old blueliner. A strong training camp earned him a spot on the opening night roster, and Christiansen has spent the start of the season on the second pair with Damon Severson. So far, he's chipped in four assists while skating 16:39 per night, and he and Severson have been on the ice at 5-on-5 for 11 goals for and nine against.

Along the way, he's started to show the game that made him a standout performer in juniors (22 goals and 50 points in 38 games his final year of junior hockey with Everett of the WHL) as well as one of the AHL's top defensemen. He's just one of two blueliners at that level to score at least 10 goals each of the past three seasons, totaling 37 goals and 125 points in 174 games with Cleveland in that span.

Playing in a system that encourages defensemen to be active, Christiansen has used his smooth skating skills and the offensive instincts he showed in the minors to be a natural fit in head coach Dean Evason's system.

"I think the style that Dean is coaching allows the defensemen to get more involved, and I've had more confidence to join the rush," Christiansen said. "It's probably a combination of continuing to work on that in the summer, being more comfortable at this level and then the style of play that we're playing."

Evason has spoken repeatedly about players having a clean slate when he took over, and it's fair to say Christiansen has made the most of that as he's earned and held on to his spot thus far.

"There was a position open," Evason said. "When we went through training camp, he was the one that stepped into that spot. He did earn that position, and he's played extremely well (in the early going). By all accounts, he's done that last year in Cleveland as well, so he's been a real good fit for us early in the season.

"(Christiansen and Severson) both have great skill, but they've simplified the game where they're playing north, they're playing fast. We're not messing around with the puck in our zone. They're getting it up and

they're getting it going. They're both great skaters. They're both joining the play, which we want all our defensemen to do."

For Severson's part, he was happy to have another Western Canadian on his side, as Christiansen hails from the Vancouver area while Severson is from Saskatchewan. Whether that's helped the two develop chemistry quickly or if their games just mesh, they've had success in the early going.

"He's played really well so far, a lot of confidence," Severson said. "I'm trying to help as much as I can and do my part as well, but he's done well helping me out and I feel I'm doing my best to help him out as well. I think the chemistry is there. We both like to move the puck and get up in the play and possess it as well. We want to play with the puck rather than playing defense. We're playing to our strengths right now and hopefully continue to do that."

There may also be one more key to Christiansen's success. After nagging hip troubles the past few seasons, he said he worked a lot smarter instead of harder in the offseason, spending less time on the ice but taking a more targeted approach to training. He also switched up his workout routine to attack the issue, all in an effort to feel better in games.

"Just having a free mind with no pain is something that goes a long way," he said. "I gotta knock on wood now. I am just trying to keep my body as dialed in as I can so my mind can work freely."

Add it all up and things have been working for Christiansen this season, something he never doubted would happen.

"I felt like I could be at this level and I had the abilities to play at this level," he said. "I love playing hockey, so it's not like I was completely grinding (in the AHL). I was enjoying every day, and we went on that playoff run (last season). I'm not looking too far forward, just being where I am at the moment and trying to help the team win."

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets battle back to earn a point in San Jose](#)

By Max Miller- November 6, 2024

Vitek Vanecek made an NHL career-high 49 saves for the San Jose Sharks in a 2-1 overtime win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at SAP Center on Tuesday.

"It is a great feeling. I mean, when you feel it, you feel it and then you see every puck," Vanecek said. "Then you're just trying to help the guys [by] making saves. I hope I will stay on track like that, and then it's going to be more games like that."

Alex Wennberg won it for San Jose at 3:11 of overtime. He skated through the neutral zone, cut between two Blue Jackets defenders just inside the blue line, and made another move around Zach Werenski in the high slot before beating Elvis Merzlikins glove side with a wrist shot.

"It's a team that bought me out, and it's kind of ironic having a little luck there, scoring against them," said Wennberg, who played for Columbus from 2014-20. "I had great memories from Columbus, so I feel like it's always fun to play against them. Obviously, scoring a goal and helping the team win, I think that's all that matters for me. At the end of the day, the one thing I know is to shoot high glove on Elvis. [I have a] little bit of tricks up my sleeve, but that's from playing against the guy for several years."

Jack Thompson scored his first NHL goal, and Fabian Zetterlund had two assists for the Sharks (4-8-2), who have won four of five. Macklin Celebrini had three shots in 17:06 of ice time in his return after missing the previous 12 games with a hip injury.

"It was tough to feel the rhythm," Celebrini said. "I mean, we're a month into the season, and it's the best league in the world, so, it's tough to jump right in and feel the speed right away, but I felt like I started to get a little bit better as a game went on."

Kirill Marchenko scored, and Merzlikins made 25 saves for the Blue Jackets (5-5-2), who have lost three in a row.

"We didn't play that rush very well," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We did a lot of the things we talked about. We kept the puck out of the net and had a ton of great looks, we just didn't score."

Carl Grundstrom appeared to have given the Sharks a 1-0 lead at 7:54 of the second period, but the goal was waved off after the Blue Jackets challenged the play for offside.

Thompson, who was playing in his 10th NHL game, did give San Jose a 1-0 lead at 18:49. He scored on a one-timer from the left circle off a cross-ice pass from Will Smith four seconds after a power play expired.

"[Thompson] has been good for us," Sharks coach Ryan Warsofsky said. "He had another good night tonight, and I am glad to see him get rewarded with the goal."

Marchenko tied it 1-1 at 9:17 of the third period. He got the rebound of Damon Severson's slap shot, moved the puck to his forehand, and tucked a shot past the left pad of Vanecek.

The goal came on Columbus' 45th shot of the game.

"We were just on their 'D,' not giving up any opportunities going our way," Blue Jackets forward Kevin Labanc said. "It is unfortunate we didn't score, but I think if we create offense like that every single game, then I think we are going to be fine."

NOTES: Wennberg has five points (three goals, two assists) and a plus-8 rating in his past five games. ... Sharks defenseman Jake Walman was a healthy scratch. ... The assist was Smith's first in the NHL (11th game).

The Athletic / Are payment deferrals the new big thing in NHL contracts? What execs, agents say

By Chris Johnston- November 5, 2024

When Jake McCabe signed a five-year extension with the Toronto Maple Leafs last week, he became the third NHL player in a matter of months to deploy a little-used mechanism in the league's collective bargaining agreement by deferring two salary payments beyond the length of the contract.

Structuring the deal in that manner carried benefit for both player and team, with McCabe feeling he squeezed a few more take-home dollars out of the arrangement and the Maple Leafs marginally reducing the cap hit they'll be charged with for having him on the roster.

Given those mutually advantageous rewards, and the recent uptick in deferred salary contracts being registered, you might think we're on the verge of a new trend that will be copied and repeated across the league.

An overwhelming number of NHL general managers, agents and league executives are skeptical of that, though.

Even one of the agents responsible for negotiating McCabe's new contract doesn't believe the recent wave of deals signed by his client and Carolina Hurricanes players Jaccob Slavin and Seth Jarvis marks the start of anything resembling a new craze.

"I still think it's going to be a very niche thing and it only works if it's very specific files," agent Scott Bartlett of Bartlett Hockey told The Athletic. "I don't know that it's usually in the player's best interests."

The ability to defer compensation in NHL contracts has been permitted by the league since before the salary cap was instituted almost two decades ago. It just never became a commonly used practice.

As one GM pointed out: "This isn't new, but rarely ever does a player want to wait on his cash."

The Arizona Coyotes deployed the maneuver on Shane Doan's final contract in July 2016 but for different reasons than we're seeing it pop up today. By pushing back \$2.5 million in signing-bonus and performance-bonus payments, a cash-strapped Coyotes ownership group bought itself an extra couple of years to make Doan whole for the 2016-17 season.

In turn, Doan continued to cash checks well after he hung up his skates and began transitioning to a career in management.

Credit the Hurricanes for finding a new application for the practice: In a higher interest rate environment like we have now, they identified the opportunity to use deferred compensation as a tool to effectively give players more money at the same cap hit while potentially unlocking tax benefits in the process (more on the mechanics of that below).

The Hurricanes signed Slavin to a \$51.69 million, eight-year extension on July 1 that included a \$4.55 million payment deferred until 2033, and then signed Jarvis to a \$63.2 million, eight-year deal on Aug. 31 featuring \$15.67 million in payments deferred until 2032.

Last Monday, the Leafs signed McCabe to a \$23.5 million, five-year extension that will see \$5.5 million deferred until 2031.

Understanding the pros and cons of those contract structures hinges on the concept underpinning the "Time Value of Money," which states that money available now is worth more than the same amount in

the future due to its potential earning capacity. This principle recognizes that the value of money decreases over time due to inflation, plus the opportunity cost of not being able to invest that money today and start earning interest on it.

To account for that fact, the NHL calculates the present value of deferred salary using the Secured Overnight Financing Rate (SOFR) one-year interest rate plus 1.25 percent to discount what it was worth at the time of deferral. The present-value salary is then used when calculating a player's cap hit.

In McCabe's case, the Leafs were able to reduce his cap charge from \$4.7 million to \$4.51 million with the deferrals. Because Jarvis deferred more money for a longer period of time, Carolina lowered his cap hit from \$7.9 million to \$7.4 million using the maneuver.

The benefits of structuring deals like this are obvious from a team perspective — added cap flexibility plus less upfront financial exposure for owners who can use the extra time to earn interest on money earmarked for deferred payments well down the road — but they're not as obvious for players.

Generally speaking, players prefer to secure as much up-front money as possible in their contracts so they can start putting it to work sooner with investments. Think about it from your own perspective: Would you want to wait six or seven years to be paid for work completed today? And if you invested the money now, how much could it grow in that span?

What's made this a viable consideration, though, is an uptick in interest rates. Previously, when rates hovered around 1 percent, there wasn't enough of a premium built in for an NHL player to even consider deferring compensation. But the contracts signed by Slavin, Jarvis and McCabe each guaranteed an annual return on deferred money above 5 percent, and that return is fully guaranteed — meaning there's no risk of nonpayment, no investment risk and no tax assessed until the payment is made.

They're fully locked in and protected no matter what happens in the financial markets.

In a summer when the Hurricanes faced contract negotiations with a number of key players, the deferred compensation deals with Jarvis and Slavin helped bridge the gap in negotiations while protecting their cap sheet.

"We're a competitive team that's trying to put together the best roster we can, and doing that means we have to be careful with our contracts and efficient with our spending," Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky told *The Athletic*. "We're talking about some players who had some great years for us and deserved to be well-compensated for that, and we were trying to find a way to get them the money they deserved while still managing the cap space in a way that worked for us and made it so that we could continue to put a good team together around them."

For McCabe and the Leafs, the deferred compensation helped break a stalemate. The sides were stuck in their respective financial positions for some time before it opened a path to get them across the finish line.

McCabe's specific circumstances made it a viable option: It's almost certainly the last NHL contract of consequence he'll sign since it takes him to age 36, so there's some added appeal to getting paid into potential retirement. He's also an American who won't be living in Canada full-time when the \$5.5 million deferred payment comes due on Jan. 1, 2031 — which means it'll likely be taxed at a lower rate than if it was paid out while he was playing for the Maple Leafs.

So, clearly there can be some benefits. The players who signed deferred-compensation deals in recent months are each valuable members of their teams and weren't forced against their will to do so.

Why then the skepticism about the possibility of a flood of players following their lead?

For starters, a number of agents who spoke with The Athletic are completely against the idea of pushing back payments because of the “Time Value of Money.” The entire notion is dead on arrival for those in that camp because they don’t think the tradeoff is even worth exploring.

There’s also the prevailing thought that it only really makes sense for those like Slavin and McCabe, who are signing contracts that likely take them to retirement. What we haven’t seen in the NHL is a bona fide superstar in his prime deferring salary the way Shohei Ohtani did when he signed a free-agent deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers last December — choosing to take payments totaling \$680 million after his \$700 million, 10-year deal expires and he’s no longer paying high California state taxes.

There’s no sense that’s going to change, either.

“From our stance as an agency, it’s a hard ‘no’ on the elite younger players and it’s a hard ‘no’ on the top free agents,” Bartlett said. “We don’t think it’s going to make sense for the broader population.”

The other threat to the practice is an existential one. Multiple ownership, management and agency sources told The Athletic they expect the NHL and NHLPA to eliminate the ability to defer compensation when they go through the next round of CBA negotiations in 2026. Neither side is believed to be likely to fight for it to stay as it is.

In September, deputy commissioner Bill Daly said that there’s some “fear” the maneuver creates circumstances where there’s cap circumvention.

“It throws out of whack some of the other checks and balances we have in the CBA, which forces interpretations in terms of how we allow it and what’s permissible and what’s not permissible,” Daly said. “The original deferred-comp rules were developed in a non-cap world as opposed to in the cap world, so they kind of were inherited, and so they probably need adjustment on some basis going forward.”

What that means in the here and now is there’s a limited guaranteed window for enterprising teams and agents to exploit the mechanism.

While deferred-compensation deals are clearly having their moment in the NHL — there are whispers about more of them being explored right now — the overwhelming sentiment in the industry is that they’re bound to remain the outlier rather than the rule.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Sillinger, Merzlikins, Johnson & More

By Mark Scheig- November 5, 2024

Welcome to November. Welcome also to shorter days and more nighttime. We're in the thick of fall. For the Columbus Blue Jackets, this means their annual trip to California.

The team flew to San Jose on Monday in advance of their game Tuesday night against the Sharks. Then they'll have three days before playing a back-to-back set against the Kings and Ducks on Saturday and Sunday.

We have plenty to get you caught up on in this edition of News and Rumors. We begin this week catching up with Cole Sillinger.

Catching Up with Sillinger

The Blue Jackets are coming off an awful set of games losing by scores of 6-2 and then 7-2 to the Jets and Capitals. The games were nowhere near the standard set by the team.

Sillinger knows the effort wasn't good enough.

"It wasn't to our standard," Sillinger said. "We know we slipped a bit. It just goes to work ethic. I think for us, that obviously wasn't good enough both games and obviously a response. We have a game like that at home and then we have a chance to make it a decent weekend. And then we go out there and don't get the job done as well."

While the team wants to move past the weekend as quickly as possible, Sillinger admits they don't want to forget about it either in the sense of knowing what not to do. It's a fine line.

"You don't want to be so caught up in the past because then it's too hard to move on and then really to make strides if you're always worrying about what happened in the past. But you want to know why. Maybe it wasn't the best effort or the best consistency and stuff like that. But turn the page and get the opportunity to do it again."

Sillinger is starting to take ownership of this team as are some of the other younger players. However don't try telling them young and old is an excuse. In his eyes, that's not even a story with these Blue Jackets.

"Young, old. I think that storyline is past us right now. We don't have any excuses just because we're young. We don't have any excuses just because we have some key guys out. All of those excuses are out the window. We talked at the start of the year that as a young core, we want to take the next step. I think as we do that and as we take more ownership then it just shows more maturity in our group. We win as a team. We lose as a team. At the end of the day, it's on everyone but we all have to look in the mirror after this past weekend."

You have noticed in recent games Sillinger is playing the wing alongside Adam Fantilli. Coach Dean Evason has liked the look of the top line of Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko. He's also liked Justin Danforth in the middle. This has allowed Evason to put Sillinger on the wing.

Sillinger knows his role. It doesn't matter where he's slotted in the lineup.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Sillinger said. “It doesn’t matter if I’m a wing or a center. My role’s pretty clear for myself at least. I think being good on both ends of the puck and complimenting whoever I’m playing with scoring goals and creating offensive plays. I think it’s pretty clear what my role is.”

Merzlikins Toning It Down

Elvis Merzlikins has played well to start the 2024-25 season. Despite giving up six to the Jets last time out, he still has shown improvement from last season.

Merzlikins has that personality to him in which there’s a showman in him. But according to Evason, he asked Merzlikins to take a step back for the benefit of the team.

At least so far, the message has been received loud and clear. Merzlikins has toned things down. Outside of breaking his stick at the end of the Edmonton game when he lost his shutout, he’s kept his composure and has made everything about team, which is the central theme to an Evason coached team.

“I’ve liked everything about Elvis since Day 1 besides snapping his stick over when he lost the shutout there which I get what his frustration was,” Evason said. “I asked him to maybe keep that inside because the win is more important than the shutout. But he’s by all accounts, he’s curbed a lot of that kind of stuff here. And he’s worked and competed in games and in practices. He’s been fantastic in our room as a leader. He’s established himself as a presence on our hockey club.”

Just hearing Merzlikins speak, you can tell he’s taken the team message to heart. So far it’s translated to better results for him. This will be a story to follow all season. If he can find his game and keep things toned down, that could bode well for him and the team for the rest of his contract.

Johnson Skating Again

After Monday’s practice, Kent Johnson appeared out of the Blue Jackets’ locker room in his gear. He was heading to the Ice Haus for a skate.

It’s the first time he’s skated we are aware of since suffering an upper-body injury. The good news was he avoided surgery. Although the team hasn’t shared an official timeline, we have a rough idea of when he might be available to play.

Johnson still has a ways to go. He hasn’t joined the main practice nor has he taken contact. But assuming he feels good every step of the way, an optimistic view could see him return at the end of November. A reasonable view sees him return in December.

Given what was originally thought of as a long-term injury, this is welcomed news for a team who has already dealt with their share of major injuries. The Blue Jackets were humming on offense when he was in their lineup. Perhaps a return is closer than we first originally thought.

Side Dishes

- The Blue Jackets will have two full days off of practice this coming week in California. After Tuesday’s game in San Jose, they won’t practice again until Friday. Coach Evason didn’t want to get specific but he did say there will be some team-building activities in that time. “We went really hard today. We practiced hard. It’s just an opportunity to team build a little bit with our group. I’ve always liked to give the guys a couple days off and come back. That one day, you get a bit of rest. But there will be a little bit of team building as well as some rest for a long road trip.”
- Evason said watching back the past two games was worse than he expected. He cited compounded mistakes and structural mistakes along with a lack of effort. The point of Monday’s practice was to get all of those back in order.

- Appears the Blue Jackets will make one lineup change if the practice lines were any indication. James van Riemsdyk skated on the fourth line with Sean Kuraly and Kevin Labanc. Zach Aston-Reese was rotated in and projects to be a healthy scratch Tuesday.
- Here are the lines and pairs the Blue Jackets showed Monday at practice. Merzlikins worked in the home net and is projected to start Tuesday night.
- Yegor Chinakhov-Sean Monahan-Kirill Marchenko
- Cole Sillinger-Adam Fantilli-Mikael Pyyhtia
- Dmitri Voronkov-Justin Danforth-Mathieu Olivier
- James van Riemsdyk-Sean Kuraly-Kevin Labanc
- Zach Werenski-Ivan Provorov
- Jake Christiansen-Damon Severson
- Jack Johnson-David Jiricek (Jordan Harris rotated in)
- Elvis Merzlikins/Daniil Tarasov

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day #12: Elvis in Net as Blue Jackets Look to get Back to Basics Tuesday Night as California Road Trip Begins in San Jose.

By Ed Francis- November 6, 2024

SAN JOSE SHARKS

TUESDAY, NOV. 5
10:30 P.M.

SAP CENTER
SAN JOSE, CA

SJ:
3-8-2 (14 pts; .308%)
Pacific Division: 8th of 8
Western Conference: 16th of 16
NHL: 32nd of 32
[ROSTER](#) // [SCHEDULE](#)

Following a strong start to the season, the Columbus Blue Jackets were hit with a heavy dose of reality in their first back-to-back games of the season on Friday and Saturday.

The 6-2 and 7-2 losses to the Winnipeg Jets and Washington Capitals were Columbus' two worst losses of the season. The Jets and Caps are two of the best teams in the league with potent offenses, but the Blue Jackets were thoroughly outplayed in both games and it felt as if they made more mistakes in those two games than they had made the rest of the season combined.

That's something head coach Dean Evason said the team focused on at Monday's before practice.

"We watched every goal," said Evason. "It's not calling guys out. I think we established that right away. It's teaching, it's learning, and it's being accountable."

The first chance to see the effectiveness of those addressed concerns will come Tuesday night, when the Blue Jackets battle the San Jose Sharks.

Despite a three-game win streak that Saturday against the Vancouver Canucks, the Sharks remain the team with the fewest points in the NHL. It's a game that, if Columbus can rediscover their structure, they should be able to win.

Here's what to know when the puck drops in San Jose for what will be the Sharks' fourth straight home contest:

CBJ	SEASON STATS	SJ
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3.55	10th	GOALS FOR	28th	2.46
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CBJ	SEASON STATS			SJ
3.45	25th	GOALS AGAINST	t-29th	3.77
17.2%	20th	POWER PLAY	15th	20.5%
80.0%	15th	PENALTY KILL	14th	81.5%
28.9	17th	SHOTS FOR	26th	27.3
29.2	20th	SHOTS AGAINST	27th	31.8
49.8%	17th	FACEOFFS	15th	50.1%

SAN JOSE: LAST THREE GAMES

TUE, 10/29	vs. Kings	W, 4-2
THU, 10/31	vs. Blackhawks	W, 3-2
SAT, 11/2	vs. Canucks	L, 3-2

SAN JOSE: TEAM LEADERS

GOALS	Mikael Granlund Tyler Toffoli Fabian Zetterlund	6
ASSISTS	Mikael Granlund Jake Walman	8
POINTS	Mikael Granlund	14

CBJ SEASON STATS SJ

ODDS & PROJECTIONS

CBJ WIN PER MONEYPUCK: 53%

CBJ ODDS PER ESPNBET: -135

- For the first time this season, the Blue Jackets are the betting favorites. They are -135 to win as of Tuesday afternoon. The Sharks remain one of two teams (the Montreal Canadiens being the other) who have been the underdog in every game they've played.
- The offense sputtered a bit in the last two games, but Columbus' 39 goals through 11 games is still tied for a franchise record with the 2018-19 team. In that season, they scored four goals in the 12th game — ironically, that was also a mid-week game in San Jose. Columbus won 4-1, with the Sharks only goal being scored by current Blue Jacket Kevin Labanc.
- Elvis Merzlikins gets the start in net for the CBJ. Zach Aston-Reese is a healthy scratch as James van Riemsdyk draws back in. Here are Tuesday's complete lines:

LW C RW

59 Yegor Chinakhov 23 Sean Monahan 82 Kirill Marchenko

4 Cole Sillinger 19 Adam Fantilli 82 Mikael Pyyhtia

10 Dmitrin Voronkov 17 Justin Danforth 24 Mathieu Olivier

21 James van Riemsdyk 7 Sean Kuraly 62 Kevin Labanc

LD RD

8 Zach Werenski 9 Ivan Provorov

LD	RD
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2	Jake Christiansen	78	Damon Severson
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3	Jack Johnson	55	David Jiricek
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STARTING GOALIE	BACK-UP
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90	Elvis Merzlikins	40	Daniil Tarasov
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1st Ohio Battery / After Toughest Test to Date, Blue Jackets Face Another Tough Challenge Out West

By Will Chase- November 6, 2024

You knew it wasn't always going to look easy.

While it probably wasn't as easy as the Columbus Blue Jackets were making it look, among the early-season surprise teams came away with their first winning month of October since Brad Larsen's first year behind the bench in 2021-22.

Dean Evason's club had a 5-3-1 mark in October, setting franchise records for goals scored along the way.

Through Oct. 31, the Blue Jackets put up 3.89 goals per game, good for ninth in the league and tied with the Carolina Hurricanes. The Jackets scored exactly six goals in each of their first four wins before breaking that streak in a 2-0 win over the New York Islanders on Oct. 30.

That's also taking into account the loss of Kent Johnson, who is out for the foreseeable future with an upper-body injury and hasn't played since Oct. 17. He did skate yesterday which is good news, especially, with how he was looking with five points (two goals, three assists) in the first four games.

Consider that through Nov. 3, the Blue Jackets played four of the top five teams in the standings at that point, going a combined 0-5-0 against the Minnesota Wild, Florida Panthers, Winnipeg Jets, and Washington Capitals.

Evason has done a good job of getting his players to buy into a new style and way of thinking that compliments them, and the results have been more than favorable, as the above numbers point out.

In the team's first nine games, one could make the case the club has been in every single game with a legitimate chance to come away with two points. The only game that stuck out was Oct. 19 against the Wild — a 3-1 loss — in which the Jackets never got their game going.

No one gave the Blue Jackets much of a chance before the season — for good reason — and as MoneyPuck points out, they have a 0.2% chance at the second wild card. The trajectory of this season forward is as much about trying to instill winning confidence in the locker room as it is about bearing those results out on the ice night in and night out.

A similar sentiment has been mentioned before, but there's a different kind of mindset with this group and this coach as opposed to prior seasons.

As the calendar turned to November, the greatest challenge yet presented itself as the league-best Jets were a bit too much to handle for this group.

Columbus was able to tie the game in the first period and keep it within a goal in the second period before Winnipeg turned on the jets and skated away with a 6-2 win.

The Blue Jackets have faced six different opponents in the second half of a back-to-back. On Saturday, Columbus was in that very situation themselves for the first time against the Capitals and the game was essentially over before people were in their seats.

Two Capitals goals 1:42 into the game as part of a five-goal first period, thanks for coming.

Now the club had a few days off to practice and regroup before going on its annual west coast trip, which takes them through San Jose (3-8-2) on Tuesday, Los Angeles (7-3-3) on Saturday, Anaheim (4-5-2) on Sunday, and Seattle (5-7-1) on Tuesday, Nov. 12.

The Sharks and Ducks, like Columbus, are going through their own rebuilds and are 8th and 7th respectively in the Pacific Division. Seattle is sixth in the division with the Kings second.

Regardless of how well the opponent on the ice is playing, West Coast trips are always a challenge. It could also be just what these Blue Jackets need, especially following its worst two losses last weekend.

The Athletic / NHL Playoff Report: Wild and Capitals on the rise, Predators and Bruins falling off

By Dom Luszczyszyn- November 5, 2024

Welcome to the NHL Playoff Report, a monthly look at the league through the eyes of each team's chances of making the playoffs: who's up, who's down and why.

After each night's slate of games, our playoff projections page is updated taking into account the results from those games and fresh new data to feed into the model. Every night, everything changes and those changes add up quickly, especially if a team goes on a heater (or cooler). Those changes can also be difficult to view at a glance and it's good practice to take stock regularly of what's been happening. That's what the Playoff Report is all about.

Here's how things currently shake out in the East and West.

On the rise

Minnesota Wild

Initial expectations for the Wild were mild. That immediately looks way off — no other team has seen a bigger change in their point projection (+11.6) and Net Rating (+20.1) to start the season. That's led to substantial movement in Minnesota's playoff chances and the Wild are now a near lock (93.4%) to make it.

What's driving the rise? For one, somehow the Wild are even better defensively than expected, allowing just 1.84 expected goals against per 60 so far compared to an already staunch 2.24 last season. The team's top pair of Brock Faber and Jake Middleton have been a key factor there, allowing just 1.55 xGA/60 in 137 minutes together. Faber is proving himself as an elite No. 1 and Middleton has bounced back splendidly. Both defenders have seen their Net Rating jump by over three goals. It helps, too, that Filip Gustavsson looks like himself again behind that strong defense after a tough season last year.

Most importantly, though, it's having early Hart trophy frontrunner Kirill Kaprizov dominating every night. The model already thought very highly of him to start the season with a projected plus-22.7 Net Rating, but his torrid start has him up to plus-26 now. That puts him in Kucherov country — firmly a Tier 1 player. That's a tide that's lifted a lot of boats with Marco Rossi and Mats Zuccarello looking even stronger too.

Kaprizov's Wild look like a wagon.

Washington Capitals

Usually, when an unexpected team starts red-hot, that start also comes with red flags. It is very difficult to find any with Washington right now — the Capitals look actually good. They have the second best expected goals rate in hockey, their penalty kill has been amazing and the power play has created a lot of looks so far.

The Capitals have deserved every bit of their 8-3-0 record, enough to see their Net Rating improve by 18.5 goals, all the way to plus-1.8. Average! That improvement, plus their actual results, has Washington in the playoff driver's seat with a 68 percent chance, way up from 19 percent to start the season. No team has seen a bigger jump in playoff odds.

To some, that still may feel too pessimistic given how good Washington looks so far. Dylan Strome is a legit No. 1 center, young players like Connor McMichael, Aliaksei Protas and Rasmus Sandin have

levelled up, and the team's veteran core — Alex Ovechkin, Tom Wilson and John Carlson — has significantly turned back the clock. The Capitals seem like the real deal and deserve all the credit in the world for their start — especially managing it without prized free agent acquisition Matt Roy.

The pessimism, then, is due to questions of sustainability. How long can the Capitals keep playing at this level? The longer they do it, the more believable it becomes, obviously, but it still has only been 11 games. That small sample warrants some caution.

To wit, the last time the Capitals controlled play at this level (57.7 percent of expected goals) actually wasn't that long ago. It was late December 2022, fresh off a 9-1-0 stretch that gave the team a 20-13-4 record. They went 15-24-6 the rest of the way with 47 percent of the expected goals. That data point isn't meant to diminish what Washington has done so far, it's just to help explain why the Capitals aren't quite in playoff lock territory yet. It's important not to abandon your priors, but to adjust them at the right pace.

The Capitals have looked excellent to start and it is notable they look this good right out of the gate given all the changes made in the offseason. They're a team to watch, one that looks like a very solid playoff bet.

Carolina Hurricanes

Despite what many wanted to believe this offseason, the Hurricanes are still a Stanley Cup contender. The core is still good, the depth is still deep, and the system still works. But even the most optimistic probably would've had a hard time believing they'd start 8-2-0 and improving their five-on-five numbers. Carolina is currently sporting 62.6 percent of expected goals, up from 56.7 percent last season. Carolina: still good.

While the team's playoff odds didn't jump much (can't go much higher starting at 89 percent), the Hurricanes did see some of the biggest jumps everywhere else. Their projected point total is up 7.4 points, their odds of winning the division have doubled and most crucially their Stanley Cup odds have gone up significantly to 17.3 percent. They're the new favourites, surpassing the Oilers.

We'll see if this is the year Carolina actually makes good on that promise, but for now one big strength is the shuffle on defense. Dmitry Orlov and Jalen Chatfield have earned high marks stepping in as the new second pair, while the new third pair of Shayne Gostisbehere and Sean Walker have absolutely crushed their sheltered minutes. That blue-line depth is a big thing driving the team's early success.

Winnipeg Jets

The Jets are off to an incredible 11-1-0 start and while that's done great things for their playoff odds (+21 percent), their jump in Net Rating has been a little more modest. They get credit for a hot power play, but under the hood there hasn't been substantial movement in actual chances created there. At five-on-five, they actually have a lower goals and expected goals ratio compared to last year. Banking points is great and the Jets should once again be a threat to win the division, but there's a lot more room for regression here compared to the three teams above.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Columbus's playoff odds didn't materially change, but the underlying foundation looks stronger — enough to see a plus-20 improvement in Net Rating. A lot of credit here goes to the top line, all of whom have significantly levelled up thanks to earning 66 percent of expected goals together while scoring at near point-per-game paces. The other noteworthy thing: Elvis Merzlikins looks like himself again with 1.1 goals saved above expected. That helps his rating, as does the model slowly decreasing the weight of his challenging 2022-23 season as we move further into this season.

Honorable mentions: Calgary Flames, Ottawa Senators, Vegas Golden Knights

Falling off

Nashville Predators

An 0-5-0 start is a tough hole to dig out of and to their credit, the Predators have already almost erased that deficit with a 4-1-1 stretch since. Still, we all expected a lot more after Nashville's epic free agency splash that saw the team add Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei.

It can take time for a new team to gel and perhaps that's what we're seeing here, but to start the Predators are struggling to generate as much offense as last season. That's been especially felt down the depth chart where Nashville's lack of quality centers after Ryan O'Reilly has been a notable problem. Tommy Novak struggling to step up in a bigger role has been a big factor. Skjei was supposed to help with that from the back end, too, but his underlying numbers have been rough.

No team has seen their playoff chances drop more than Nashville, who have gone from 75 percent to start to 41 percent now. Pedestrian work at five-on-five is the biggest culprit within their control and that may change as the season progresses. But the biggest obstacle standing in Nashville's way may be entirely outside the team's control: the rise of both Minnesota and Winnipeg.

That leaves a stacked roster of teams ahead of the Predators in the Central (especially once Colorado gets healthy) which limits some of Nashville's playoff paths. The Predators entered the season relatively safe and likely in a battle for third with Winnipeg. They now look closer to a wildcard team with the model ranking them as the West's eighth best team.

Pittsburgh Penguins

While there wasn't much expectation for Pittsburgh to make the playoffs (the Penguins started the season at 37 percent), the early returns are even worse than imagined. After a 5-7-1 start that featured a six-game winless streak, the Penguins' odds are already down to just 11.6 percent.

No team has seen a bigger fall according to the model than the Penguins, whose Net Rating dropped 12.7 goals with most of the drop coming on the defensive side of the puck. Pittsburgh was already a wreck in that regard, but look even worse now going from 2.77 expected goals against per 60 last season to 3.25 in the early going. The team's worst offenders being their best players is especially concerning. Sidney Crosby, Bryan Rust and Erik Karlsson came into the season with below average Defensive Rating and those marks have only cratered further.

The biggest issue on the roster right now, though, might be Michael Bunting. Acquired in the Jake Guentzel deal, Bunting looked like a perfect fit in Pittsburgh with 19 points in 21 games last year. This season he has just one assist in 12 games. No player has seen a bigger one-month drop in projected Net Rating than Bunting who fell by 6.2 goals.

Utah HC

I expected Utah to be a featured player in the playoff race this season, but that's looking less likely now. A strong 4-1-1 start has been completely undone by a tough stretch where the Hockey Club has won just one of their last six games.

Utah's playoff chances have subsequently dropped from 54 percent to 29 percent with key injuries being a driving force. The loss of Sean Durzi was major, especially with how he was playing on the top pair next to Mikhail Sergachev (who has been as good as advertised). Not having John Marino for a while stings too and it leaves Utah with a fairly thin blue line after Sergachev. Michael Kesselring is a nice player, but if he's your team's second-best defenseman you may be in trouble.

That might be fine if Connor Ingram was holding things down behind a thin blue line, but he's regressed heavily to start. After saving 17.7 goals above expected last season and 8.9 the year before, Ingram has allowed 4.5 more than expected this year in 10 games. Hard to win being half a goal worse per game, and his .881 save percentage is far from enough. To get back on track with Durzi and Marino out long term, Utah desperately needs Ingram to find his game.

Boston Bruins

The Bruins have turned things around slightly with back-to-back shutouts over the weekend, but their playoff chances still only sit at roughly 50-50 right now. They've seen the third-biggest drop in Net Rating thanks to drops in play across the board. Their power play is worse than last year, their penalty kill is worse than last year and their work at five-on-five looks especially pedestrian with just 48 percent of the goals and expected goals.

The team is really struggling to score with the biggest drop in perception belonging to David Pastrňák. His projected Net Rating has gone from plus 22.4 to plus-19.7; still elite, but he hasn't looked anything close to a Tier 1 player.

Edmonton Oilers

The Oilers were the Stanley Cup frontrunner to start the season, but have now seen their Cup odds drop by four percentage points with a six-point drop in projected points. The main reason is an offense that doesn't look nearly as potent as expected, scoring 2.12 goals per 60 at five-on-five (down 0.77 from last season) and 5.2 goals per 60 on the power play (down 5.3). In both cases, they're generating fewer chances too — especially on the power play. The usually lethal unit currently sits 18th in power play xG per 60.

The Athletic / 4 Nations Face-Off rosters: Projecting each team's lineup — and the toughest calls


By Chris Johnston- November 5, 2024

Time is running short for bubble players looking to make an impression on their countries' management teams ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Just four weeks remain until rosters featuring 20 skaters and three goaltenders need to be finalized and submitted on Dec. 2, and just 100 until play begins.

The February tournament will be the first that brings together all of the top players from the United States, Canada, Sweden and Finland since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. That lengthy window has created a nearly blank slate, with only a few holdovers from hockey's last best-on-best event.

With player evaluations still ongoing, we've taken a crack at forecasting what each country's roster could look like.

 DAYS TO GO #4Nations pic.twitter.com/55wJxDtq8K

— NHL (@NHL) November 4, 2024

Canada

(Note: Highlighted players have already been named to the roster.)

The good: Canada is so deep at center, it can contemplate shifting last season's Hart Trophy winner to the wing. And if it's not Nathan MacKinnon moving over, it'll probably be 50-goal man Brayden Point. Given how little preparation time teams will get before the tournament, there's comfort in familiarity for Canada with two defense pairings that have spent considerable time together in the NHL, plus the Zach Hyman-Connor McDavid duo from Edmonton and Brad Marchand-Sidney Crosby duo from the 2016 World Cup.

The not-so-good: The goaltending is a major question mark for a country accustomed to lining up in front of surefire Hall of Famers at best-on-best events. Jordan Binnington and Adin Hill have at least both played their share of pressure-packed games — each winning a Stanley Cup — and the competition for playing time between them should remain open right up until February. Basically, the hottest hand gets the job. I went with Cam Talbot at No. 3 based on his strong start to the season in Detroit.

The toughest call(s): When you're picking a Team Canada, you're always going to be leaving multiple top forwards off the roster. In this case, they include Alexis Lafrenière, Mark Scheifele, Connor Bedard, Steven Stamkos, John Tavares and Quinton Byfield. The defenseman I had the toughest time passing on was Noah Dobson, who gets beat out by the experience of Josh Morrissey and the flexibility of MacKenzie Weegar. I opted for Weegar as the No. 7 because of his comfort playing either side of the ice.

Finland

(Note: Highlighted players have already been named to the roster.)

The good: Built strong down the middle of the ice, Finland's group of centers is experienced and elite. Being able to lean on Aleksander Barkov and Anton Lundell coming off back-to-back trips to the Stanley Cup Final with the Florida Panthers will be a major bonus. This forward group also includes a number of players in solid form to start the NHL season, including Mikko Rantanen, Mikael Granlund and Kaapo Kakko. Sending out Juuse Saros as the No. 1 goaltender should also be a source of confidence.

The not-so-good: Just eight Finnish defensemen have played an NHL game so far this season, and Jani Hakanpää — the player I've selected as this team's No. 7 — isn't among them. He is, however, on the verge of a return to the Toronto Maple Leafs lineup after a lengthy knee injury and gets the nod because of his size, penalty-killing acumen and history of playing with Esa Lindell in Dallas. Beyond Miro Heiskanen, this blue line's star and stalwart, the Finns will be challenged while playing in their own zone against deep offensive competition.

The toughest call(s): Given the depth down the middle, I couldn't find a place for Jesperi Kotkaniemi on this roster. Goal scoring may prove to be a challenge for this group, and if that ends up being the case, I may regret leaving Eeli Tolvanen and Patrik Laine at home. Ultimately, Laine's uncertain injury situation cost him a spot.

Sweden

(Note: Highlighted players have already been named to the roster.)

The good: Sweden is built from the back end out, with Vezina Trophy-quality goaltending and an elite group of defenders. It's an experienced collection of players, too. The Swedes should also be encouraged by the play of the three forwards already named to the roster with Filip Forsberg, Mika Zibanejad and William Nylander each off to productive starts. Leo Carlsson is a potential X-factor for this team if he can handle a meaningful role.

The not-so-good: There's the potential for this to be a top-heavy forward group, which could pose matchup challenges against the United States and Canada. It's hard to know what the Swedes will be able to squeeze out of the bottom seven up front.

The toughest call(s): Jonas Brodin, Adam Larsson and Oliver Ekman-Larsson were difficult omissions on this loaded blue line. Rickard Rakell could easily have claimed a spot among the forwards following a great start to the year in Pittsburgh. I opted for youth in the 13th forward spot with William Eklund rather than the experience of Mikael Backlund.

United States

(Note: Highlighted players have already been named to the roster.)

The good: I mean, look at this roster. Top to bottom, it's stacked. You've got three of the NHL's top goaltenders, elite puck-movers on every defense pairing and a group of forwards that can match up with any style of play an opponent throws at them. On paper, this has to be considered the tournament favorite.

The not-so-good: I'd really have to stretch to find something here. One of the challenges I encountered when trying to map out forward lines was the lack of right-shot forwards for the wings. Of course, leaving Tage Thompson and Cole Caufield off my projected roster didn't help matters. Even if Team USA ends up bringing 10 or 11 left-shot forwards to the tournament, I'm guessing it won't slow them down any.

The toughest call(s): Passing on Caufield didn't feel right given his red-hot start to the season, but this team has plenty of players who can put the puck in the net. Among the other forwards who gained strong consideration and were ultimately left home: Jason Robertson, Brock Nelson, Alex DeBrincat and Patrick Kane. It was especially difficult to leave defenseman Jake Sanderson out of this group, but 34-year-old John Carlson is still playing great and should be a steady presence.

The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: Playoff outsiders I still believe in, at least for now

By Sean McIndoe- November 5, 2024

It was a rough year for one of my favorite stats. Years ago, when Elliotte Friedman introduced his curse of November 1, I had the same reaction that most fans seemed to: It didn't make sense. Over a decade ago, Friedman pointed out how rare it is for a team to be four points out of the playoffs at the start of November and end up making it, but the results felt wrong. After all, you can make up four points in two games — doing it in five months should be easy. And yet Friedman found that the failure rate was close to 90 percent.

So can any teams break the curse this year? Yes. Two of them, and that's it, because only two teams were four points back as of Friday. Those teams would be the Predators and Blackhawks, and yeah, I think one of them is a little more likely to make the push than the other. But thanks to a late start and Gary Bettman's beloved leaguwide parity, almost everyone is close enough not to panic yet. (In the East, nobody was even two points back when the new month began.)

OK, so much for this year's early season curse narrative, at least until U.S. Thanksgiving arrives and we can switch to that. But there are still a lot of good teams outside the playoffs right now, including some we all assumed would make it. So today, I'm going to see if I can name five teams that wouldn't be in the playoffs if they started today (based on points percentage), but that have a good shot to be in when it matters.

That's going to be tougher than it could have been, since the Oilers moved back into a spot after last night's win and robbed me of a freebie. But we love a challenge, so let's do this from least to most confidence.

Bonus five: Teams outside the playoffs that are most likely to make it in April

5. Detroit Red Wings — I'm not especially confident, which is why they're the first team on the list. It's been an uninspiring start to the season for Steve Yzerman and the world's most plodding rebuild. But with some winnable games coming up, and the Eastern race looking a little more vulnerable than expected, the Wings still have a strong shot. (Checks Dom's model forecast.) OK, well they've got a shot.

4. Utah Hockey Club — This one feels a little cheap, since they were holding down a spot up until the Oilers' win last night and are only out based on the regulation wins tiebreaker. I'm still not completely sure what to make of this team, and they haven't looked great since that 3-0-0 start that may have just been a jolt of early adrenaline. They're on a tough road trip right now and have some tough matchups when they get back home. You know what, I'm talking myself out of this, let's move on ...

3. Nashville Predators — They're 4-1-1 in their last six, so they're already digging out of the early hole they found themselves in. It was a heck of a hole, though, and there's plenty of work left to do. I think they get there, although I'm interested to see how they do against a surprisingly tough Kings team tonight.

2. Boston Bruins — I get that it's bad. I've read Fluto's dispatches from a season slipping away, mixed in with the occasional benching. And I think the potential for a window-slam of a season is real. I just don't think it's all that likely, even after a rough first month. I still think the Bruins get in, even if they're technically behind the Senators for the final Eastern spot based on points percentage. I also have a sinking feeling Boston fans might be ready to argue with me about that.

1. Colorado Avalanche — The easy call, right? Yes, they're well under .500 and looking up at teams like the Ducks and Blues. But with the almost ridiculous list of injuries they're facing up front, it feels like anything close to treading water should be good enough for now. Don't fall too far behind, get healthy and be ready when the games truly start to matter. They'll be fine, which means I'm pretty much guaranteed to get at least one of these right.

Which five current playoff teams will those outsiders be replacing? I'll leave that as an exercise for the reader, mostly because I don't need to get dunked on by Capitals fans any more than I already have this week.

On to the rankings ...

Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

As a bit of a rulebook nerd, I found this piece on the evolution of officiating very interesting. But I think we can all agree on the main impact of the switch to a two-referee system: The refs now blatantly hate your favorite team twice as much as they used to.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (8-3-1, +17 true goals differential*) — Uh oh, is the Vegas flu back? It might be, as the Knights are 8-0 at home on the year. Now they just need a road win. They'll get a pair of chances this week, as they visit Edmonton and Seattle.

4. Winnipeg Jets (11-1-0, +29) — Many of you accused me of choosing last Monday to finally pump the Jets' tires only because they were playing Toronto that night, and that I was working some sort of reverse jinx to summon a Leafs win. My reply to that is (gestures at my entire miserable life as a Leafs fan) yeah I can't really do that.

But yes, they did finally lose, ending the streak and putting them at risk of a hangover slump. That didn't happen, with impressive take-care-of-business wins over the Wings and Blue Jackets before yesterday's comeback against the Lightning.

Meanwhile, Murat has an update on the less inspiring story off the ice.

3. New York Rangers (8-2-1, +20) — Good stuff from Arthur here on the many big decisions looming for Chris Drury.

2. Dallas Stars (7-4-0, +7) — Our top two teams headed to Finland for a two-game series, which the Panthers swept. That's enough to knock the Stars out of top spot for the first time this year, although it's hard to get too concerned about a team with the best goaltending in the league.

1. Florida Panthers (9-3-1, +7) — Speaking of the Finland games, as far as the local fans go, this may have been the highlight:

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Minnesota Wild — I'm not quite there yet. But it's getting close, right?

The Wild have been one of the biggest stories of the season's first month, coming into the weekend sitting at an impressive 7-1-2 and staying right behind the Jets for top spot in the Central. They're hitting on all cylinders, with Kirill Kaprizov looking like an early Hart candidate, strong goaltending from Filip Gustavsson, Marco Rossi showing signs of a breakout year and solid possession numbers that suggest this isn't some random fluke. Oh, and they did all that despite having an early seven-game road trip dropped into the October schedule. They even broke out the ol' two-puck trick play. Not bad.

As Russo puts it, they might have something special brewing. So it's fair to ask: Why did the Jets push their way into an early top-five spot, but not the Wild?

It's close, but I think there are a few factors. The Jets are coming off a 110-point season while the Wild missed the playoffs last year, and while some of that was due to injuries, it does make the Jets' first month feel somewhat more sustainable. The Wild are also shooting north of 13 percent as a team, which isn't going to last. And while we don't pay a ton of attention to single-game outcomes — remember, these are the long-term rankings — we can note Winnipeg did win the only head-to-head matchup. It's not much, but if you think it's a coin flip, maybe it helps.

All that aside, the Wild are certainly making a push, and it's probably time to start taking them more seriously than most of us have been. Yesterday's OT win over a mediocre Maple Leafs team wasn't the most impressive win of the season, but it had a dramatic finish that highlighted the power of a smart defensive play.

But here's the more important point: With Kaprizov in his prime, some young players already in key roles, a new coach in his first full season and the massive Zach Parise/Ryan Suter buyout burden finally coming almost entirely off the books next year, the Wild are starting to look like a long-term contender. And that means it may be time to retire the jokes about them always being in the forgettable middle and get used to a world in which they're a powerhouse.

Not quite yet, though. I want to see it for a bit longer before I give this team the top-five bump. But we're close, which is something I can't say I saw coming heading into the year.

The bottom five

The five teams that are headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for James Hagens, or maybe someone else.

You should be concerned. Yes, even if you know your team isn't going to be in this section. They still have something to worry about.

5. Buffalo Sabres (4-7-1, -6) — The Flyers and Blue Jackets have both been good enough to at least temporarily vacate their spots, meaning we have room for a new team. Unfortunately for the league's longest-suffering fan base, that has to be the Sabres, who've lost three straight in regulation and are starting to generate some tough questions for GM Kevyn Adams. Next up are the Senators, a team that's blown past them on the way to the Atlantic playoff hunt.

Ah well. At least they seem to have finally found a guy who can make big saves.

4. Montreal Canadiens (4-7-1, -16) — Sometimes, the beat writers can say more in five words than I could in an entire section:

On the Canadiens, and vomit. <https://t.co/zQEEeSKE0Q>

— Arpon Basu (@ArponBasu) November 1, 2024

Meanwhile, the bigger news coming out of the weekend was Noel Acciari's debatable hit on Juraj Slafkovský and Arber Xhekaj's response. It doesn't sound like the DoPS will take any action, and we'll wait for word on any injuries.

3. Anaheim Ducks (4-5-2, -7) — They've only won four of 11, but Lukáš Dostál is looking like the real deal.

2. Chicago Blackhawks (5-7-1, -5) — They earned a pair of weekend wins, beating the Kings and Ducks on the road, although they lost to the Sharks. How many teams this year do you think will lose to everyone except San Jose on their California trip?

1. San Jose Sharks (3-8-2, -17) — They're hot! Red-hot, even. OK, so their win streak got snapped at three on Saturday, but we're going to focus on the positive here, and progress is progress.

Not ranked: New York Islanders — The case for the Islanders as a 2024-25 playoff team was a pretty straightforward one. They'd made it last year, so in theory, they just needed to hold serve. And with Patrick Roy in his first full season as coach and Ilya Sorokin almost certain to rebound from his first so-so season, the path to improvement was clear. Sure, they might be a little old and a little too expensive, and there were questions around what the offense could do. But if the playoffs were the goal, it was right there for the taking.

One month in and the results have been mixed. Yesterday's loss to the Rangers drops them to 4-6-2 and was their fourth loss in the last five. And the only win in that stretch was against the Sabres, so it barely counts. With Mathew Barzal and Adam Pelech both out long term, things are looking bleak.

If there's good news, it's that Sorokin has been very good, maybe even good enough for Roy to give him more than a split of the starts with Semyon Varlamov. But it hasn't been enough to make up for an offense that was ranking toward the very bottom of the league even before losing Barzal.

They get an interesting matchup tomorrow with the Penguins, a team that seemed to be in full crash-and-burn mode until running off a few wins this week after loading up the top line. The Penguins were one of those teams that was supposed to be laying claim to the Islanders' playoff spot. So were the Senators, and they're up on Thursday. Heading into the season, this might have looked like a prime week for the Islanders to make a statement and defend their turf. Now, it's more like a chance to keep the season from tipping toward early disaster.

ESPN / What's at stake as NHL and NHLPA begin collective bargaining agreement talks?

By Emily Kaplan- November 5, 2024

As the NHL and NHLPA enter the penultimate season under their collective bargaining agreement, there's a new tone emanating from both sides: optimism.

For a league that has experienced three lockouts over the past 30 years, it's a welcome change. The NHL and NHLPA last negotiated a CBA in 2020 -- amid the COVID-19 shutdown, when discussions were bundled with return-to-play protocols. Financials were bleak, especially for a sport quite dependent on gate revenue. In an unprecedented climate, both sides collaborated for solutions. Four years later, they all rebounded in a big way. Revenue hit a record \$6.2 billion last season, as the league also set new marks in attendance and saw a spike in sponsorship revenue, thanks to evolving attitudes on sports betting, helmet decals and showcasing individual players' personalities.

In Sportico's recent valuations, the average NHL franchise is worth \$1.79 billion -- a 37% increase in just one year.

Last month at a board of governors meeting, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said he'd like to start (and hopefully end) CBA negotiations early, saying "in terms of the relationship, we think we're in a good place."

The NHLPA's new executive director, Marty Walsh, is equally positive these days. "Myself and Gary Bettman have had very open conversations about how this potentially could be laid out," Walsh told ESPN in a recent interview. "Going in with an open mind, with open dialogue is how I've always approached collective bargaining."

Both sides are motivated to continue momentum. And sources on both sides suggested that if a deal was reached as soon as this spring, there would likely be few changes to the overall structure, just tweaks. But from a player's perspective, there's only so often you can ask your boss to reopen your contract and hope to change the terms. So what exactly would the players like to achieve?

Walsh agreed to an interview but declined to speak on specific issues, saying it was premature. Walsh is currently on his annual fall tour -- a series of individual union meetings with every team -- to canvass players opinions. "Once we assess where we are at and what players feel, we will take next steps after that," Walsh said.

In the interim, ESPN spoke with 21 veteran players around the NHL to get an early pulse on what issues are important to them. The players were granted anonymity to speak openly. Here is a primer of what topics are on the table and what might be feasible in a new CBA:

The biggest concern for players: Grow the pie

The one item that came up again and again with players was money. "It's not overly complicated at this point; we need to grow revenue," one player said. "It's what all the other sports are doing. We don't need to be squabbling over points; we need to make the pie larger so we can have a larger slice. This deal has been great for the owners."

Players cited several examples on how the league's value has ballooned. Jeff Vinik bought the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2010 for a reported \$93 million. Vinik recently sold a majority stake of the team, which is now valued at \$1.8 billion, per Sportico. Meanwhile players' salaries have largely remained stagnant.

Florida Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk's cap hit (\$9.5 million) is roughly the same as what his father, Keith Tkachuk, was making in the 1999-2000 season for the St. Louis Blues (\$10 million).

The NHL and NHLPA currently have a 50-50 split on hockey-related revenue. The salary cap, which is calculated based on HRR, remained largely stagnant through and directly following the pandemic to account for losses -- although the league has hinted at bigger jumps the next several seasons. Players are hoping those jumps are sizable.

"Coming out of COVID was tough, and it felt like we took a lot of compromise to get to where we should be," one player said. "Now it seems like the league has done well with HRR, and hopefully that allows us to see the benefits."

It's unclear what economic proposals either side will bring to the table. Players uniformly felt they took a cut when the split went from 57-43 to 50-50 in the 2012 CBA. They have no appetite to decrease further, even if the league tries to argue that in other sports, including the NBA and NFL, the players' share is less than 50%. Several players wondered whether the NHL could institute a luxury tax.

"We have some owners who would definitely be willing to spend over the cap," one player said. "We should reward that. And then that money gets spread across all the owners, and for some of the smaller-market teams it puts money in their pocket."

Players said they would like to receive a cut of future expansion fees as the league flirts with the idea of 34 teams. "We should fight for that, no doubt," one player said. But, according to sources, that could be a sticking point for the league.

As usual, many players brought up escrow -- in which the league withholds a portion of their salary until revenue is accounted at the end of the season -- as something they were passionate about eliminating.

"I think a lot of guys get confused or caught up with escrow, but it's just a mechanism for getting paid," one player said. "We need to be focusing on the bigger picture. We want to get rid of escrow. I'm sure the owners want to get rid of guaranteed contracts. We all should be focused on how we can bring more attention and dollars to the sport."

What could it be? The NHL should get another infusion of cash on the new Canadian TV deal, which will kick in for 2025-26. Players were optimistic about the presence of Amazon, which is dabbling with streaming games in Canada and produced an all-access show, "Faceoff," that got buy-in from players and the league.

Said one player: "I don't think there's a silver bullet, or one thing that will help revenue. But all of our energy should be focused on finding new ways to grow our sport."

The possible tweaks

Throughout the course of the season, when matters are raised by players or at a general managers meeting, the answer can be a common refrain: That's a CBA issue. So what topics since 2020 do the players feel passionately about revisiting?

The schedule: One of the most intriguing topics expected to be discussed is the schedule. Anything could be on the table, from eliminating the three-day Christmas break to reconsidering the way out-of-division games are scheduled. Restructuring the preseason became a hot topic in September after a rash of high-profile injuries including to Drew Doughty, David Reinbacher and Patrik Laine. One idea that has been floated is trimming the preseason in favor of adding two games to the regular season (putting the total at 84). Players surveyed by ESPN had mixed opinions. "There are teams scheduling eight preseason games, and that's too many," one player said. "Some of them become s--- shows, especially when you

see rosters some teams put out. Some teams are playing three [games] in three days." Veteran players acknowledged that while they generally needed only two or three games to feel game-ready, the preseason contests are valuable for prospects to get evaluated. "Our preseason is just too long," one player said. "We're almost done with camp. Media day in the NBA was two days ago, and they finished earlier than us. It's insane. I'd take 84 games if we could start earlier." Others were wary of the expense of a longer regular season "Hockey is a tough contact sport. Playing those two extra games could be the difference between having a guy in the playoffs or losing him," one player said. "Also the wear and tear on your body. You may not notice it after two games, but it all adds up. I don't think it's a good idea."

Playoff format: A handful of players want to change the playoff format to a typical 1-8 seeding by conference. "A lot of guys would like to see that change, myself included," one player said. But according to sources, there have never been substantive discussions about that at board of governors meetings. The league believes that the format is strong and that the Stanley Cup playoffs are the best postseason in sports. It would have to be a major sticking point for players to get addressed.

"The Jack Eichel issue": In 2021, Eichel was sidelined with a herniated disk in his neck. He wanted to get an artificial disk replacement, a procedure that had never been performed on an NHL player. The Sabres preferred a more proven alternative. Under the CBA, teams get final say over a player's medical care. It caused a massive rift, resulting in Eichel's trade to Vegas, and was an issue many assumed would be brought up in the next CBA. Players uniformly said they should get final say over their medical rights. And while there are some who are super passionate, many view Eichel's situation as a rare occurrence -- and not necessarily an easy tweak. One player noted they've actually made big strides in this department. "When I first started [11 years ago], it was super taboo to get a second opinion, like you were disobeying your team," the player said. "Now they've made it so much easier, much more common. We're in a decent place." At its core, this CBA clause about final say on medical decisions is really about guaranteed contracts, which players do not want to relent on. Several players advocated for full benefits post-retirement. In the CBA, eligible retired players can enroll in the NHL Health and Benefits Fund and, in certain circumstances, receive a subsidy toward the cost. There have been enhancements on this over the years. For example, the offering used to be a one-size-fits-all policy. Now, it's more scalable. Some players want further assurances, even if it would be at a massive cost. "Health care is a huge thing," one player said. "We have one of the best pensions in major sports, but we need an answer for health care and get full benefits."

International events: In the past, participation in international events was atop players' wish list. However with the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off tournament, commitment (and progress) on scheduling a regular World Cup, and commitment to play in the 2026 Olympics in Milan, players feel they are in a good place. "Feels like the league finally met us on international play. It's important to players, and I think the league also understands its importance for the growth of the sport, even if owners are taking on the risk of a guy getting injured, and dealing with the IOC and IIHF on insurance," one player said. But for the players it's still important to get it in writing.

Rules and equipment: General managers have given the league feedback at their recent meetings that they would like changes to the long-term injury reserve rules, which has allowed some teams to activate players just as the playoffs begin. While some players had mixed opinions here, none felt super passionately that it needed to be addressed -- although they knew the league might bring it up. The NHL also will likely discuss equipment mandates, such as neck guards.

Next-gen ideas: Some players said their agents have bugged them about ideas for the next generation, such as changing the draft age to 19, shortening the draft, or finding an out to the Canadian Hockey League and NHL agreement that stipulates teenagers must be returned to their junior clubs if they aren't on the NHL roster. The NHL and CHL agreement is separate from the CBA. And with a massive sea

change coming -- the NCAA is considering changing eligibility rules regarding CHL players -- it's tough to predict what is feasible here. But many of the draft-related ideas have not received traction, according to sources.

What's next in the process?

Walsh and his top lieutenant, Ron Hainsey -- a defenseman who retired from the league in 2021 -- are continuing their fall tour, which is expected to stretch into December. Discussions on the tour will help shape points of emphasis for negotiations with the league. Walsh said he is in no rush.

"It's really dictated by the players," Walsh said. "It depends on where we are with the players, what the players want to do. I mean, this is their association. We'll talk to the entire team, and then we follow up with player reps and follow up individual players who are interested in this stuff. Players are everyday people. They're busy with life and family and everything else. So some players want to get very engaged and some just want to support their teammates."

If the sides come to a resolution by June, there is nothing that prevents a new CBA from going into effect before the prior one is completed. So if both parties agree, the new CBA could theoretically begin as soon as next season.

Walsh was hired in February 2023 after an exhaustive search. He was the longtime mayor of Boston before serving as the U.S. Secretary of Labor. Players on the search committee said they liked Walsh's political background -- his ability to communicate, form relationships and garner support. He has remained accessible, giving all 750-plus members of the union his cellphone number.

"I think guys are feeling really confident being led by Marty," one player rep said. "He has good energy, a good feel for the CBA, the league and also how to develop relationships with Gary [Bettman] and work with the league. We know issues are going to come up, but we feel like he'll get them resolved."

One question several players wondered: Who will exercise their voice and help in the fight? The NHL's new marketing campaign is all about Gen Z as Connor McDavid, Auston Matthews and Connor Bedard become the new faces of the league. In the past, Sidney Crosby has been very opinionated on league issues behind the scenes, then goes through proper channels.

"Other sports that are seeing a lot of success are driven by their stars, and that's where we want to be," one player said. "Patrick Mahomes, LeBron James, they're at the forefront of league issues. That matters."

Walsh said it was too early to identify which players might be the spokespeople for the union. "Depends on how negotiations are going," he said.

ESPN / Canada's toughest roster decisions for 4 Nations Face-Off

By Kristen Shilton- November 5, 2024

There's something to be said for having options. Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off GM Don Sweeney -- alongside associate GM Jim Nill -- is going to have an abundance of them when it comes to setting his country's roster for the upcoming tournament.

We're just under a month away from the Dec. 2 deadline for management of each country -- that's Canada, the USA, Finland and Sweden -- to submit their roster of 20 skaters and three goaltenders for the event taking place on Feb. 12-20.

The NHL has eschewed its usual All-Star Game in favor of this tournament, but have no fear: Canada alone will practically carry enough talent to mirror that of any league-wide showcase.

Choosing from the country's best is a tantalizing thought. Given the fortune of faces to choose from, who will actually make Sweeney's squad? And which players will be the toughest to leave off the list?

Oh, and -- who exactly is going to tend goal for this team?

Each nation announced six players that would be on the team back on June 28. For Canada, that's defenseman Cale Makar, along with forwards Sidney Crosby, Nathan MacKinnon, Brad Marchand, Connor McDavid and Brayden Point.

The countdown is officially on for decision day. The roster itself is bound to contain a surprise (or two) so instead of a full-blown projection, we're breaking down each position with the skaters most likely to be a lock, and the ones on whom a decision will be hardest.

Centers

The shoo-ins: Connor McDavid, Sidney Crosby, Nathan MacKinnon

Stating the obvious: Canada will be deep down the middle. That's true whether MacKinnon is lining up there or sliding to the wing (something he has already told reporters he's open to doing) and Brayden Point ends up in this category. Either way, when you can roll out these three in any capacity on the same lineup card, you're doing alright.

The tough calls: The fourth center spot for Canada is likely Nick Suzuki's to lose. He has a finely tuned 200-foot game and takes on Montreal's hardest matchups every night, all while elevating his teammates in the process. That's a well-rounded addition to the roster. However, it won't be easy for Sweeney to dole out roles here, while also considering who could potentially fill winger slots instead.

Ryan O'Reilly would be an excellent checking-line center option, and has Stanley Cup and Conn Smythe pedigree on his resume. Steven Stamkos also comes with ample winning experience, and his power-play acumen (an accurate bomb of a one-timer) make him a versatile extra piece. His leadership is a valuable commodity, too.

In terms of pure production, Mark Scheifele just scored 42 goals two years ago and he already is averaging over a point per game this season for the red-hot Winnipeg Jets. Anthony Cirelli is another candidate for the fourth-line center role, given his strong start to the season (12 points in 11 games) and, of course, his connection to Canada's head coach (and Tampa Bay Lightning bench boss) Jon Cooper.

The real conundrum for Canada here is whether they'll prioritize flash and scoring without a balance of some grit-and-grind energy. Although that could always be found in the country's stable of superior winger options that we'll be looking into next. But does Canada need to incorporate a certain physicality to be at its best? Or just allow the fast-paced, free-flowing offense it can easily create be their guide? It's only a two-week affair we're talking about. No need for Canada to overthink things ... right?

Wingers

The shoo-ins: Brayden Point, Mitch Marner, Sam Reinhart

It was mentioned earlier but should go without saying: Point is a terrific center and could play there too. Reinhart was second in NHL goal scoring last season (with 57 markers) while Marner consistently ranks among the league's most dynamic playmakers.

This trio is a great point of entry into a long list of difficult decisions.

The tough calls: Zach Hyman could be among the sure things here ... if not for a bout of early-season struggles. The Oilers' winger tallied 54 goals last season -- third-most in the league -- but has just two points in 11 games in 2024-25. If that trend continues, someone else might leapfrog over Hyman on the depth chart.

The same goes for Quinton Byfield. He's right on the cusp of this roster. Frankly, he might be the hardest call of all. How Byfield plays the next month could ultimately decide his fate. After putting up 20 goals last season, the 22-year-old is off to a slow start with just five assists in his first 11 games. If Byfield can pad those stats over the next couple weeks with improved play, Sweeney will have to take notice of the young King who can also play center.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins is weathering a mediocre opening to this campaign (four points in 11 games) that may see him bumped in favor of someone like Brandon Hagel. The latter would surely get Cooper's vote given how Hagel has been so important for Tampa Bay, and is having a great season (13 points in 11 games). Alexis Lafreniere's scorching start in New York (10 points in 10 games) also puts him firmly on the radar for a spot.

Brad Marchand comes with that get-under-your-skin element Canada may not have elsewhere, and remains productive (with nine points in 12 games so far) even at 36 years old. Not bad. Sam Bennett provides the same sort of sandpaper and Cup-winning history. Would having both Marchand and Bennett be too much of a good thing in that respect?

Mark Stone is another veteran player with a Cup on his resume -- and is one of the best defensive forwards in the game -- but his on-ice contributions are frequently overshadowed by trips to the injured list.

Mathew Barzal is a point-per-game player who seems to single-handedly keep the offensively challenged Islanders afloat, and he can play at center or on the wing (the 27-year-old transitioned from one position to the other when New York acquired Bo Horvat in 2023). That determination alone might be enough to sway Sweeney in his direction. Barzal hit the long-term injured reserve, and will miss four to six weeks, which obviously impacts the decision-making process here too.

Travis Konecny will get a long look. He's strung together consecutive 30-goal seasons for Philadelphia, and has seemed to get better year over year.

On the topic of promise, no we haven't left out/forgotten the youngest of Canada's burgeoning forward group. Connor Bedard and Wyatt Johnston both deserve serious consideration to make this team. But where do they fit into how Sweeney wants to construct this group? Bedard and Johnston are sensational

in their own rights, and can certainly handle themselves against the other club's best players. This tournament is also an audition of sorts for Canada's 2026 Olympic team (for which Sweeney and Nill will also be assistant general managers) and putting Bedard and/or Johnston on this stage to see how they do could plant seeds of confidence for what's to come in 2026.

Defensemen

The shoo-ins: Cale Makar, Devon Toews

Hoo boy. This could be Sweeney's Mt. Everest in creating Team Canada. It's simple enough to tap Makar -- a four-time Norris Trophy finalist and one-time winner -- and his teammate Toews as the nation's top pairing.

From there, things get tricky.

The tough calls: Noah Dobson seems like an easy pick despite how overlooked his defensive play is following a stellar 2023-24 season. Shea Theodore is in the prime of his career with the Golden Knights, skilled with the puck and a special teams asset. All that should land him a slot. But he'll have competition.

Theodore's teammate Alex Pietrangelo makes sense from a pure defense perspective, and he's an added veteran presence to what could be a relatively young defense corps. Josh Morrissey seems constantly overlooked for how good a player he's become, and the way he can weave in some offense without sacrificing on the defensive side. Morgan Rielly will be on the long list as well, having made many a past appearance for Team Canada and continuing to perform at a high (and reliable) level.

Evan Bouchard is the real wild card for Canada's back end. He anchors Edmonton's power play using the same high-end passing and playmaking that make him a threat at even strength. However, Canada will have Makar for their power-play needs, and other options that can potentially bring more to the mix than Bouchard.

MacKenzie Weegar may lack name recognition, but he's physical and fiery and that would balance out some of the finesse on which Canada's blue line will be heavy.

Similar to Bedard and Johnston, Canada has an up-and-coming defensive star in Owen Power who they'll definitely be testing for the Olympics. Is now the time to see what he's got on a smaller stage?

It's also important to note that Drew Doughty -- currently sidelined by a broken ankle -- is expected to be healthy by the time this tournament gets going. Will he move the needle for Sweeney and steal an extra spot perhaps? We can't rule out the possibility.

There are almost too many right choices here to make a wrong one for Canada's defense. The same might not be said for its goaltending.

Goaltenders

The shoo-ins: Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill

If Canada is going to have an Achilles Heel, it's likely to be goaltending. In contrast to the embarrassment of riches Canada boasts everywhere else, there just aren't the same number of elite-caliber choices in net.

Binnington is best suited as his country's No. 1 goalie. The 31-year-old had a superb, and sorely underappreciated, 2023-24 season (.913 save percentage, 2.84 goals-against average) and that was while backstopping a Blues team that was lacking defensively. Binnington also rises to the occasion; it's

the biggest games and most charged-up moments where he seems to thrive (see: St. Louis' run to a 2019 Stanley Cup victory). That's good news for Canada.

Hill is an ideal backup. He replaced Logan Thompson as Vegas' starter during their successful playoff trek to a Cup win in 2023, and had a strong follow-up campaign in 2023-24, with a .909 SV% and 2.71 GAA. He and Binnington would be a fine tandem.

Speaking of Thompson, he might have the inside track as the country's third-stringer. Despite so-so stats (.876 SV%, 3.21 GAA), Thompson is 4-0-0 in his first season with the Capitals. Will that stave off the remaining competition?

The tough calls: Stuart Skinner would have been an obvious selection for Canada after the way he helped drag Edmonton to Game 7 of the Cup Final last season. But Stuart has been woefully unreliable at times -- including out of the gate this season -- and with limited spots, every positive or negative counts.

Montreal's Sam Montembeault seemed like a good pick in theory, but Montembeault has been struggling for the Canadiens as of late and it's hard to say if he'd perform better surrounded by Canada's superior defense.

Cam Talbot is an intriguing name in the mix as well; he's posted decent numbers early on for the Red Wings (.913 SV%, 3.16 GAA) and would bring veteran experience to the room.

Then there's the poetic element to including Marc-Andre Fleury in this final season of his NHL career. However, Fleury's numbers haven't been great (.899 SV% and 2.93 GAA). Ditto for Darcy Kuemper, a solid veteran who's consistent but unspectacular. That about sums up the majority of Canada's goaltending options.

In the end, it could come down to two factors: who's healthy, and who has the hottest hand. Considering all that can change in a month -- and again from there -- expect Sweeney to have contingency plans in place. He won't be short on names (in most cases) to sift through, at least.

[Sportsnet.ca / How high-profile NHL off-season acquisitions are faring with new clubs](#)

By Courtney Jacobsen- November 6, 2024

It's safe to say that very few hockey fans would call the 2024 off-season boring.

Having witnessed the Edmonton Oilers claw back from an 0-3 deficit in the Stanley Cup Final to force an ultimately unsuccessful Game 7 against the Florida Panthers, what happened in the two months following continued to produce some jaw-dropping moments.

Between the Draft weekend at the Sphere in Las Vegas and a free-agency opening that saw clubs spend over \$1 billion in total, a few very notable players swapped their threads for the upcoming season.

With all clubs having played at least 10 games, we're starting to get a feel for which newbies have hit the ground running and which are sputtering.

To that end, let's take a closer look at how some of the most high-profile acquisitions — either by trade or by free agency — are fitting in with their new teams.

All data retrieved from Money Puck and Natural Stat Trick.

STEVEN STAMKOS

When the Nashville Predators went out and spent over \$111 million on four shiny, new players on the first day of free agency, they probably didn't expect to be in the basement of the NHL's Central Division just four months later.

It certainly doesn't help that their shiniest — and by far most decorated — acquisition, Steven Stamkos, has not lived up to his standards. At least, not yet.

The two-time Stanley Cup Champion as captain of the Tampa Bay Lightning has struggled to find his footing in Smashville, scoring just two goals and three assists across 11 games. Additionally, all but one of Stamkos' points has come on the man-advantage. While strange to have just one point at 5-on-5 just under a month into the season, it's not completely out of the ordinary for Stamkos. In 2023-24, nearly half his point total by the end of the regular-season came on the power play. In fact, this year in Nashville, just six forwards have managed to score at even strength.

Stamkos receives video tribute, massive standing ovation in Tampa return

The whole team is struggling to produce offence, not just Stamkos. Though for \$8 million per season, the Predators were likely hopeful for more characteristic output from the two-time Rocket Richard Trophy winner. They would certainly prefer if the team wasn't getting out-scored 6-1 when he's on the ice.

Is this slow start indicative of what the rest of his season will look like in Nashville? Probably not.

Right now, Stamkos is shooting at a career-low 6.1 per cent. Despite being out-scored, the Predators are out-shooting their opponents 84-65 with him on the ice. His struggles can't all boil down to bad puck luck, but for a player whose career shooting percentage hovers around 16 per cent, it's fair to say he'll regress back to the mean.

MIKHAIL SERGACHEV

Before the Utah Hockey Club (formerly the Arizona Coyotes) made a big splash at the NHL Draft by trading for Mikhail Sergachev, they were in need of a top-pairing defenceman to complement Sean Durzi.

In acquiring Sergachev, they got just that. Even better, they got their guy.

The 26-year-old has effectively become their No. 1 defenceman, which was made pretty much official with the long-term injury of Durzi. Sergachev plays in all positions — quarterbacking their power play, serving on their first penalty-kill unit, and generally being their go-to guy on the back end. His 25:35 time on ice is fourth in the league in that metric behind only Roman Josi, John Carlson and Seth Jones.

Playing top-pairing minutes with Michael Kesselring, Utah has out-scored opponents 4-2 and out-shot opponents 129-97 with that duo on the ice.

Having already proven himself as a perfectly capable offensive defenceman, winning back-to-back Stanley Cups in Tampa, he came to Utah as-advertised. In 12 games this season, he's scored twice and recorded seven assists. He's recorded points in three of his last four outings, including a goal and two assists against Calgary on Oct. 30.

Though maybe not a shut-down defenceman, the native of Nizhnekamsk, Russia, ranks second amongst Utah defencemen in blocked shots with 20, trailing only Ian Cole (27).

What the small sample size tells us is that Sergachev is capable of being a No.1 defenceman and he's led Utah to a 5-4-3 record — holding their own amongst the Central Division heavyweights.

LINUS ULLMARK

Finally nearing the end stages of their rebuild, the Ottawa Senators have been searching for the goaltending that help them find their next level.

When they traded Joonas Korpisalo, Mark Kastelic and their 2024 first-round pick to the Boston Bruins in exchange for Linus Ullmark, they hoped they found it in the 2022 Vezina-winning goalie.

While Ullmark has certainly not been terrible for the Senators, he hasn't been the game-stealing, elite goaltender they expected when they subsequently signed him to a four-year extension.

The 31-year-old has made six starts, posting a .902 save percentage and a 2.62 goals-against average — not horrific for a team whose save percentage for starting goaltenders has been sub-.900 for two seasons and above the league average this year (.898).

Not horrific, sure, but not up to Ullmark's standards either.

This season, Ullmark is sitting at a minus-2.1 goals saved above expected, which is a fairly steep downfall from his 14.8 goals-saved above expected in 2023-24 with the Bruins. He's also well below his career save percentage (.918) and goals-against average (2.51).

Even watching Ullmark shows that he's not operating quite at his best. Though he's made some highlight-reel saves for the Senators, he's also had his share of stinkers, including against the Vegas Golden Knights, when he allowed five goals on 27 shots — three in the third period alone — in his first start after returning from a four-game injury-related absence.

In an ironic twist, the Senators have offered their goaltender a bit of leeway: They're neck and neck in the Atlantic Division, two points out of a tie for second place.

JAKE GUENTZEL

There is a reason that the Tampa Bay Lightning traded for the rights to pending unrestricted free agent Jake Guentzel the day before free agency opened.

Guentzel came with a Stanley Cup pedigree, several years playing with one of the best players in the world in Sidney Crosby, and has been nearly a point-per-game player (0.94/game) his entire career. Now, alongside two more top-tier players in Tampa, Guentzel seems to be picking up right where he left off.

The Lightning's top line of Guentzel, Nikita Kucherov and Brayden Point have out-scored their opponents 12-3 and out-shot them 160-142 in 138 minutes together.

Guentzel has also provided them with adequate individual success, scoring five goals and eight assists in 12 games, while getting looks on the Lightning's top power-play unit.

Even though the 30-year-old has 36 total minutes on the man-advantage, three of his five goals and five of his eight assists have come at even-strength. He's tied for third on the team in 5-on-5 scoring and third in power-play points — in short, he's capable of producing for the Lightning in all situations.

Operating at a point-per-game clip early in the season, it's clear that Guentzel is fitting in just fine with the perennial Cup contenders. The biggest question mark for him and the Lightning is his ability to stay healthy.

Though he's appeared in every game for Tampa Bay thus far, he hasn't had a full 82-game season since 2018-2019 and missed 15 games last year with an upper-body injury.

ELIAS LINDHOLM

After suffering a down year in 2023-24 that saw him score just 15 goals in 75 games split between the Calgary Flames and Canucks, Elias Lindholm arrived in Boston looking for a fresh start amidst an already offensively-gifted core.

Instead, both he and the Bruins have found themselves sputtering to an uncharacteristically slow start, only just back to .500 hockey after recent back-to-back wins.

Lindholm has been adequate offensively — his eight points in 13 games is third amongst Bruins forwards, behind linemates David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand — though he's not at the level of which he's shown he's capable when he broke out for 42 goals in 2021-22.

Perhaps that was a one-off — he's historically hovered at the 25-30 goal range — but he's been put in the best possible position to succeed by centring Pastrnak and Marchand on the top line, much like his elite linemates that year in Calgary.

Important for the Bruins, however, is that he is finding other ways to contribute while waiting for the offence to really heat up.

Lindholm has spent his career cultivating a 200-foot game and the ability to play in all situations, and that's no different on the Bruins. Amongst forwards, he ranks fourth in penalty-killing ice time at 24 minutes. Of the Bruins' 34 power-play goals allowed, only three of them came when Lindholm was on the ice. The 29-year-old Swede also ranks first amongst Boston's forwards in blocked shots.

With three points in three games, Lindholm is starting to find his footing even if he isn't the game-changer he has been in the past. But with a Bruins core that historically hasn't struggled to produce offence for extended periods of time, maybe he doesn't have to be.

JAKE DEBRUSK

The Vancouver Canucks signed Jake DeBrusk because they were in need of a top-six winger to play with Elias Pettersson. In that regard, DeBrusk hasn't paid dividends for the Canucks — the former Bruin plays primarily on the top line alongside J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser.

Despite getting looks with the team's most dangerous duo, DeBrusk just isn't producing the offence the Canucks expected when they signed him to a seven-year, \$38.5 million contract.

The 28-year-old has five points in 10 games and, perhaps more cause for more concern, he only just scored his first goal of the season on Saturday.

Part of a current career-low shooting percentage — 6.7 per cent, down from his 12.4 per cent career mark — comes down to bad puck luck and a small sample size, but he's also simply having trouble finding the net. Of his 30 shot attempts, 12 were blocked and three missed the net entirely. Among Canucks forwards, only Boeser — who has a team-high 57 shot attempts — and the snake-bitten Pettersson have had more of their shots blocked.

The Canucks needed someone with top-six offensive ability and though DeBrusk has always been a streaky scorer, his 27-goal campaign in 2023-24 proved he was capable.

His lack of finishing, however, has been a problem for a team that signed him to do just that. The Canucks have managed to keep their heads above water in the Pacific Division to this point, but if they want to replicate the success of last season, DeBrusk and the rest of their top-six need to find their offensive footing — and quickly.