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Columbus Dispatch / Replay: Columbus Blue Jackets one goal short in opening loss to Minnesota Wild

By Brian Hedger- October 11, 2024

ST. PAUL, Minn. — After accepting the Blue Jackets' offer as head coach, Dean Evason knew Thursday's season-opener at Xcel Energy Center loomed.

His new team just so happened to have his former team, the Minnesota Wild, first on the schedule — and a road matchup to boot. Evason, who coached the Wild for 251 games over three seasons, was replaced early last season during a rough stretch. Now, he's running the bench for a team mourning the deaths of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, and no longer has captain Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery).

The matchup carried added meaning for Evason, but it just didn't quite work out the way the Blue Jackets planned in a 3-2 loss, giving the Wild (1-0-0) a late scare on Zach Werenski's power play goal with 2:54 left to play.

It's quite a way for the Jackets' new coach to start out.

"It's not a secret there's more emotion for me personally in this hockey game, but the bottom line that I'm stressing to the group is that it's 'us,'" Evason said. "It's not me against the Minnesota Wild. ... It's no secret that I loved it here. Didn't want to leave, but I'm happy where I'm at."

Columbus Blue Jackets drop season-opener 3-2 against Minnesota Wild

Despite flashes of brilliance and a strong late push, the Blue Jackets (0-1-0) took a tough loss in their first of 82 games. They created several great scoring chances in the first two periods, got within a goal late in the third thanks to Werenski and just couldn't beat goalie Filip Gustavsson (30 saves) in the waning seconds.

Next for Columbus is an even tougher matchup Saturday in Denver against Nathan MacKinnon and the Colorado Avalanche, perennial Stanley Cup contenders.

Columbus Blue Jackets pull within 3-2 on Zach Werenski's late power play goal in third

Just when it looked like the Wild might cruise home with a two-goal victory, the Blue Jackets made them pay for a delay-of-game penalty taken by Jake Middleton, who shot the puck over the glass from his own zone with 3:10 left in the third.

Werenski, using a higher flex number and new curve on his stick this season, buried a slapper 16 seconds into the ensuing power play to get the Blue Jackets within a goal.

"That's part of an emphasis for me right now, at the start of the season, is just get pucks to the net," Werenski said. "Take them there and just see what happens. It's nice to get one there, but it would've been better to get the win."

Werenski's goal sparked a fevered push from the Blue Jackets looking for an equalizer in the final two-plus minutes. Gustavsson made several huge saves throughout the game, but none bigger than sliding over with 10 seconds left to soak up Kirill Marchenko's wrist shot from 41 feet out.

Minnesota Wild push lead over Columbus Blue Jackets to 3-1 midway through third on Mats Zuccarello's power play goal

The Jackets nearly sprung Sean Monahan from the penalty box, but Zuccarello wouldn't let it happen. The veteran right wing gave the Wild a 3-1 lead at 9:58 with 10 seconds left on Monahan's cross-checking penalty. Minnesota's passing inside the Jackets' zone was exemplary, getting Merzlikins to move side-to-side before Zuccarello finally slid one past him from the right circle.

Bold assisted for his third point of the game (one goal, two assists). Boldy also scored two goals for the Wild the last time they faced the Blue Jackets last season at Nationwide Arena, helping Minnesota win that one 5-4 in overtime.

The goal put the Blue Jackets in a tough spot with only half a period left.

Third period underway at Xcel Energy center between the Blue Jackets and Wild

Columbus received a brief injury scare early in the stanza as Zach Aston-Reese went crashing into the end boards behind Minnesota's net, but he eventually skated off under his own power. Minnesota is still up 2-1.

Second intermission: Minnesota Wild up 2-1 against Columbus Blue Jackets

Columbus is outshooting Minnesota 23-18 after 40 minutes, but trails by a goal thanks to Van Riemsdyk's overturned power-play tally that

Minnesota Wild surge in front 2-1 against Columbus Blue Jackets on Eriksson Ek goal late in second

The Wild capitalized on the overturned goal for the Blue Jackets by taking a 2-1 lead late in the second period on a goal by center Joel Eriksson Ek. Columbus failed to clear its own zone, leaving a loose puck that was scooped by the Wild and sent to Eriksson Ek for a wrist shot that beat Merzlikins with 3:25 left in the period.

Columbus Blue Jackets have power-play goal by James van Riemsdyk wiped out by coach's challenge

The Blue Jackets briefly took a 2-1 lead late in a power play at 10:24 of the second period on a goal by James van Riemsdyk, who skated in front of the crease and had Damon Severson's shot from above the right circle deflect off him into the net.

Wild coach John Hynes challenged the play for goaltender interference and successfully got it overturned upon review of the play. Replays showed Van Riemsdyk did make contact with goalie Filip Gustavsson's right leg, but it also looked like the Wild's netminder initiated contact by pushing his leg outside the crease — sending the Blue Jackets power forward to the ice.

"It certainly could've went either way," Evason said. "We're not going to argue it, obviously. It was so close, and we've seen it both ways. That was a break that went against us, but what we liked about the group is that we didn't sag after that. It wasn't like, 'Oh, my god, what's going on?' Or, 'What happened?' We just continued to play, and I was proud of the group after that moment."

An in-house video feed showed a close up of Van Riemsdyk seated on the bench after watching the replay. He appeared to say to a teammate, "Is that bad?"

Apparently, yes, and the game remains knotted 1-1.

Kent Johnson scores Columbus Blue Jackets' first goal of 2024-25 to tie Minnesota Wild 1-1 early second period

Kent Johnson could be primed for a big breakout for the Blue Jackets after averaging a point-per-game in the preseason. Just two minutes into the second period against the Wild, he tied it 1-1 with a beautiful turnaround wrist shot from the slot. Cole Sillinger and Damon Severson picked up their first points of the new season with assists on Johnson's goal.

The goal is Johnson's second in five career games against Minnesota. He's currently slotted into the Blue Jackets' third line with Sillinger and rookie Mikael Pyyhtia on the left wing. Evason and assistant Mike Haviland have started Johnson in that spot primarily because they liked the chemistry between he and Sillinger during preseason games and practices.

First intermission: Minnesota Wild lead 1-0 against Columbus Blue Jackets on Matt Boldy goal

Moments after Elvis Merzlikins kept it 0-0 with a fantastic stop against Mats Zuccarello, the Wild took a 1-0 lead on a goal by Matt Boldy with 2:09 left in the first period. Holding onto the puck on the right wing, Boldy fired a no-look laser into the top right corner of the net.

The puck sailed past a screen of Merzlikins by center Joel Eriksson Ek, who skated to that spot unchecked by Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov. Until the Wild rallied late, the opening frame was a good one for Columbus. Minnesota finished the period with a one-goal lead and 11-8 edge in shots, but the Blue Jackets held an 8-4 shot advantage at one point.

Cole Sillinger's hooking minor with 4:15 left negated a Blue Jackets power play and helped swing momentum in Minnesota's favor during the 4-on-4 time that followed. The Wild outshot the Jackets 7-2 in the last three minutes of the period.

Columbus Blue Jackets, Minnesota Wild tied 0-0 at first TV break

The Blue Jackets and Minnesota Wild went into their first TV stoppage tied 0-0 thanks to some nifty work by both goalies. The Jackets are off to a solid start, outshooting Minnesota 4-1 in those six-plus minutes. Here's tonight's lineup, including starters, scratches, coaches and officials:

Columbus Blue Jackets vs Minnesota Wild remember Gaudreau brothers with pregame video, 13 seconds of silence

Prior to the game, the Wild played an NHL produced video about the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau on the large screen above the ice. After a voice from the lower bowl bellowed, "Love you, Johnny!" a 13-second moment of silence preceded the game's start.

This was the second time the Blue Jackets have viewed the NHL's video tribute and followed it with 13 seconds of silence. They did the same at Nationwide Arena prior to the first home preseason game there, and the Gaudreaus will be remembered again with a new salute prior to the Jackets' home opener Oct. 15 against the Florida Panthers.

Columbus Blue Jackets sticking with practice lineup vs Minnesota Wild

The Blue Jackets only held an optional morning skate Thursday at Xcel Energy Center, so they didn't run through their expected forward lines or defensive pairs. During pregame warmups, they lined up the same during line rushes as they did in practices Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Scroll down this blog roll to see how it stacks up against the Wild.

Goalies for tonight's matchup feature Elvis Merzlikins for Columbus and Filip Gustavsson for Minnesota.

Shoulder surgery sidelines Columbus Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner

The Blue Jackets released an update on Boone Jenner during their morning press availability, relaying the captain had shoulder surgery Wednesday to repair an undisclosed injury that occurred last week during a fall into the boards. Jenner, 31, could be out five-to-six months if the injury was a labrum tear. He might also make it back in time fast enough to play in the Blue Jackets' outdoor game March 1 at OSU's Ohio Stadium.

"It's disappointing," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said. "We're all disappointed. We're more disappointed for Boone. The team will continue to rally together. We've been thrown a few curveballs but we'll continue to rally. It's gonna give opportunity for other players. You like to find out what you have, not this way, but it is what it is. We give some of the young guys more opportunity and hopefully they can respond with it."

Columbus Blue Jackets quote of the day vs Minnesota Wild

"I live for Johnny. It's a new season. He should be here. It's always gonna be tough. He's my best friend. That's something we were really looking forward to, and it's something that got taken away, so it's a tough one to still navigate."

—Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan on remembering Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed along with his brother, Matthew, as they rode bikes Aug. 29 in New Jersey. Monahan and the elder Gaudreau brother played nine seasons together with the Calgary Flames.

When will Columbus Blue Jackets face Minnesota Wild again this season?

The two-game season series will conclude Saturday, Oct. 19 at Nationwide Arena.

What NHL officials are working Columbus Blue Jackets vs Minnesota Wild season-opener at Xcel Energy Center?

Referees: Francois St. Laurent (8), Furman South (13)

Lines: Travis Gawryletz (67), Joe Mahon (89)

Columbus Blue Jackets vs Minnesota Wild broadcast information

The puck is scheduled to drop at 8 p.m. ET at Xcel Energy Center.

The game will be broadcast by Bally Sports Ohio with Steve Mears on the play-by-play and former Blue Jackets forward Jody Shelley back for another season as color analyst. In the studio, Brian Giesenschlag returns as host of the Blue Jackets' pregame and postgame broadcasts, former Blue Jackets defenseman Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre is back at studio analyst and Dave Maetzold is the broadcast's rink-side reporter. Those outside the Blue Jackets' coverage market can watch games via ESPN+ Power Play.

Bob McGelligott is the radio voice of the Blue Jackets and his call, along with pregame and postgame shows featuring Dylan Tyrer, can be heard on stations in Ohio and West Virginia that are part of the Blue Jackets Radio Network. Locally, 97.1 The Fan is the flagship station for Blue Jackets broadcasts, while 93.3 FM The Bus is the Jackets' alternate home for programming conflicts.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner to miss several months after surgery

By Brian Hedger- October 11, 2024

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Blue Jackets won't have their captain for most of the season.

Boone Jenner, injured a week ago in practice, underwent shoulder surgery Wednesday and could miss up to six months. The Blue Jackets open the season Thursday against the Minnesota Wild at Xcel Energy Center, as Jenner prepares to go through a long rehab process. The team didn't specify what the surgery repaired. If it was a labrum repair, which the Blue Jackets have dealt with multiple times the past few years, the recovery time is usually five-to-six months.

"It's disappointing," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said. "We're all disappointed. We're more disappointed for Boone. The team will continue to rally together. We've been thrown a few curveballs but we'll continue to rally. It's gonna give opportunity for other players. You like to find out what you have, not this way, but it is what it is. We give some of the young guys more opportunity and hopefully they can respond with it."

The early end of a five-to-six month recovery puts the early end of it sometime in early March, right around when the Blue Jackets host the Detroit Red Wings for an NHL stadium series matchup March 1 at Ohio Stadium. Jenner, who is featured heavily in promotional ads, has eagerly awaited a chance to play in the franchise's first outdoor game. He still has a chance to do it, which makes that day Jenner's official return target.

"If you talk to Boone, yes," Waddell said, smiling. "Obviously, we've gotta be smart about it, too, because the player's gonna play for multiple years ahead. So, we've gotta make sure we make smart decisions about it. Every individual is different. Five months puts you right at the beginning of March. We'll just see how it all plays out here in the next few months."

Should a full recovery take six months or more, Jenner's return could stretch into April or cost him the whole season. That, however, wouldn't be a smart bet to accept. Jenner's relentless work ethic is well known around Nationwide Arena, and there's no doubt he's do everything possible to return this season. Should that take until April, the Jackets have 10 games that month, including the season finale April 17 against the New York Islanders at Nationwide Arena.

The surgery was performed by Dr. Peter Millett at The Steadman Clinic in Vail, Colorado, the same doctor and clinic who performed labrum repairs on former Blue Jackets forwards Josh Anderson and Max Domi.

Jenner sustained the injury last Friday near the end of a practice at The Ice Haus rink at Nationwide Arena. Chasing after a loose puck during a 2-on-2 "small area" drill intended to improve hand-eye skills, Jenner somehow lost an edge and crashed hard into the boards. He got up on his own and skated off, but left for a medical evaluation. Just 14 hours earlier, forward Dmitry Voronkov sustained an apparent shoulder injury 15 seconds into his first shift of a preseason game against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Waddell said Voronkov won't require surgery and could be back in late November after undergoing a rehab program that's already showing progress. In the meantime, the Blue Jackets are reeling from another stunning double whammy of injuries going into their season-opener. They're also still grieving the shocking offseason deaths of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, Aug. 29 in New Jersey.

"We all know injuries have been a part of the game," Waddell said. "The timing never seems to be good, and when you lose two of your top nine (forwards) that quickly, you have to adjust. Again, nobody's going to feel sorry for us and we're not going to feel sorry for ourselves. We've still got to go out and play hockey."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets leaning on each other to start NHL season: 'They'll stick together'

By Brian Hedger- October 11, 2024

SAINT PAUL, Minn. — Dean Evason expected to find a mess as the Blue Jackets' new head coach.

After two miserable seasons during which Columbus combined for a 91-52-21 record, a glut of injuries, a coaching controversy that led to Mike Babcock's resignation and a regime change in the front office, Evason naturally had concerns. And that was before the team's togetherness was tested in horrific fashion on Aug. 29 when Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed while riding bikes together.

With the 2024-25 season underway, however, Evason is convinced the bond his players share is one of the club's greatest strengths.

"I think this group was tight already," Evason said. "A lot of people have talked about, 'Oh, we've got to change the culture in Columbus,' and this and that. I come into a situation where these guys are close knit already, and I think it's a huge credit to our leadership group, starting with Boone (Jenner), who's just a quality human being."

Jenner, the Blue Jackets' captain, is also scheduled to meet with a specialist Thursday to determine if surgery is needed to repair an apparent shoulder injury that happened last week in a practice. Combine that with the fact that Dmitri Voronkov is out until at least late November (also an apparent shoulder injury), and the Blue Jackets are circling the wagons again. Out of respect for Gaudreau and his family, they're trying to keep the devastation of losing him separate from their frustration about hockey injuries, but it's a difficult task.

The Blue Jackets are playing for the Gaudreaus, keeping the family in their hearts and a No. 13 jersey in their locker room, but they're also playing for each other. It's almost unfathomable that a grieving team is starting its season just six weeks after a tragedy that gutted them, but the NHL's schedule is unyielding.

All the Blue Jackets can do is lean on each other, be present and do something that always made Gaudreau happy. Lace up their skates, head to the rink and play.

"We don't really have an option but to be there for each other," center Sean Kuraly said. "I think all you see is just, 'Listen, we need each other. We need to support each other.' And that's our only way forward, right? How we can we honor John is just ... do it right. That's all we're trying to do."

Together.

"We don't need to be feeling sorry for ourselves (because of injuries) before Game 1 even starts, but we've got to stick together," Kuraly said. "We've got 23 guys, and we're just going to have to stick together. We need each other. We need each other bigtime, and I think we will stick together. We're looking forward to the challenge."

They're also looking out for each other.

Evason's teams tend to play with a hard-edged style built upon maximum effort, intensity, physicality and responding to confrontations as one big ornery group. Those are qualities the Blue Jackets haven't always displayed in recent seasons, but they will now.

"We're together," Evason said. "That's a tight group. They'll be even tighter. They'll stick together. They've got each other's backs. That's the type of thought process, the type of attitude that I want in a

team and our coaching staff wants in a team, but I think most importantly ... that's what the team wants."

The Jackets are also supporting each other off the ice. Gaudreau's death was a stinging loss for the entire hockey community, but especially at Nationwide Arena. He's missed every day, but the Blue Jackets' shared memories are helping them start a healing process.

"Everybody walks in here with a smile on their face lately, and we've just appreciated being around each other," defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "At the end of the day, we're just ... we miss our boy, and I can't stop thinking about their family. It doesn't make it easier, but it helps to come in here. I have really appreciated this training camp on a personal level, because just being here and being able to play helps."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets: 5 fearless predictions for 2024-25

By Brian Hedger- October 11, 2024

SAINT PAUL, Minn. — The Blue Jackets are eager to start a new NHL season Thursday at Xcel Energy Center.

They're dealing with emotional trauma related to the tragic deaths of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew, plus adversity on the ice after key injuries to captain Boone Jenner and Dmitry Voronkov. Not a single analyst forecasts Columbus escaping the Metropolitan Division's basement, so finding optimism outside the Jackets' locker room is a challenge.

At last check, however, the Blue Jackets aren't waving white flags. They're excited to play out the season, honor the Gaudreaus and create special memories in the 82 games ahead. A long season is about to get rolling, so here are five fun Blue Jackets predictions about what may happen:

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli will finish with more points than Chicago Blackhawks center Connor Bedard

It's heresy within hockey circles, especially those near Chicago and out in Western Canada, to even allow this thought even to enter your mind. Is it unlikely? Probably. Bold to even suggest? Yep.

Within the realm of possibility? Absolutely.

Bedard is still considered the NHL's next "generational talent" to come along after Connor McDavid, but the brightness of his stardom tends to make people forget how loaded the 2023 draft was at the top, especially with centers. Fantilli fell to the Blue Jackets at third overall, behind Bedard and Anaheim's Leo Carlsson, but he would've gone first in other drafts — including 2021 and 2022.

Fantilli's rookie season was limited to just 49 games because of a season-ending calf laceration, but he showed in training camp and six preseason games that his full assortment of skills are back — starting with elite speed bursts that allow him to get around defenders and drive hard to the net. Fantilli was a point-a-game player in the preseason with four goals, two assists and six points, including a hat trick, so he's capable of putting up impressive numbers.

He's still a special talent who could push Bedard in their "sophomore" seasons.

It took Werenski most of last season for his scoring touch to return, but the Blue Jackets' top defenseman returned to peak form by the end of it in April. He also finished with a career-high 57 points by racking up a career-high 46 assists. Werenski's high-water mark in goals was set in 2019-20, when he scored 20 in 63 games during a season cut short by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the potential to reach that milestone again is possible with good health.

Sillinger, meanwhile, is looking for his first 20-goal season going into his fourth NHL campaign at age 21. Sillinger's powerful wrist shot allowed him to score goals in bunches at the junior level, which is one of the reasons the Blue Jackets selected him 12th overall in 2021.

After bursting onto the NHL scene with 16 goals in 2021-22 at age 18, Sillinger found it more difficult scoring goals the past two years. A two-year bridge contract deal signed as a restricted free agent for the first time should provide plenty of motivation to reach or surpass 20 goals, which Sillinger should accomplish while filling Jenner's "net-front" role on power plays.

Rookie Denton Mateychuk will become a top four defenseman for the Columbus Blue Jackets

Mateychuk is starting out with the Cleveland Monsters because the Blue Jackets have the luxury of doing it that way. They'd have to risk losing Jake Christiansen or Jordan Harris on waivers to assign either to the AHL, and David Jiricek logged more professional experience the past two years.

That doesn't mean Mateychuk will spend all season in Cleveland. During training camp and preseason action, he stood out as one of the Blue Jackets' top defensemen. He thrived in the offensive zone, especially running the point on power plays, and showed impressive poise for a third straight NHL camp.

Mateychuk could play his way back to Columbus for his NHL debut at some point, and he'll be capable of taking somebody's regular lineup spot too. Mateychuk projects longer term as a high-level second-pair defenseman who can quarterback a power-play unit, and it wouldn't be a shock to see it happen this year.

The only team that Kent Johnson hasn't scored a lacrosse-style "Michigan" goal for, ironically, was the University of Michigan – where former Wolverines forward Mike Legg made that type of goal famous in a 1996 NCAA Tournament game.

Bringing that up to Johnson, however, is one of the few things that will put a frown on his face. It still eats at home a little that he never potted a "Michigan" in two years for Michigan, but Johnson was smiling from ear-to-ear March 24, 2023, at Nationwide Arena. He torched the New York Islanders with a wraparound lacrosse-style tally 27 years to the day after Legg made it famous.

Johnson's version included a stick lift to swipe the puck inside the Islander's zone, a deft between-the-legs deke to get around a defender in the right-wing corner and then, in one fell swoop, he picked the puck up for a tuck inside the top left corner.

Now, take that goal, move it outside into a storied college football stadium that houses Michigan's biggest rival, Ohio State, and listen to the sound of 100,000 fans reacting to the spectacle.

How's that for an NHL stadium series moment?

Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins will score his first NHL goal

The Blue Jackets' highest-paid goalie, Merzlikins, has dealt with a lot of adversity the past four years, including emotional trauma following the tragic deaths of two teammates in a span of just three years: Matiss Kivlenieks in 2021 and Johnny Gaudreau on Aug. 29.

Merzlikins has also battled injuries, illness and inconsistent performance since impressing as a rookie in 2019-20 by helping the Blue Jackets qualify for the playoffs. One of the NHL's strongest personalities hasn't had much hockey-related joy the past few years, so maybe it's time for "Elvis" to have some fun.

Stopping pucks will be his biggest source of fun, but shooting one down the ice into a vacated net to seal a victory would make him beam and cause Blue Jackets fans at Nationwide Arena to lose their collective minds.

The Athletic / Kent Johnson stands out for Blue Jackets one year after an opening-night healthy scratch

By Aaron Portzline- October 11, 2024

ST. PAUL, Minn. — One year ago, Columbus Blue Jackets left winger Kent Johnson sat at his locker, upset but careful with his words. After scoring 16 goals and 40 points as a rookie, Johnson started his second NHL season as a surprise healthy scratch.

It was impossible to ignore the contrast between that scene in Nationwide Arena and the one that played out Thursday in Xcel Energy Center, where Johnson was the most noticeable player on both ends of the ice in a 3-2 loss to the Minnesota Wild.

The 2024-25 season opener might be a good example of how Blue Jackets fans can best extract good feelings about this season.

The Blue Jackets played their back ends off and lost. They figure to play hard every night under new coach Dean Evason — his reputation says he won't accept less — but they don't figure to win enough games to challenge for a playoff spot or even a winning record.

But another long season would be silver-lined if this club's top young players — such as Adam Fantilli, Yegor Chinakhov, Cole Sillinger and, yes, Johnson — play like budding standouts. Put another way, if they turn in performances, like Johnson did Thursday, in which you can see a budding point-per-game All-Star.

All four of them had their moments, but Johnson stood out. The 21-year-old (he turns 22 in a week) had a goal, an assist, eight shot attempts and three scoring chances. He also played 18:05, which is more ice time than he drew in any game last season. The only player with more shot attempts was Zach Werenski (10).

Johnson scored the Blue Jackets' first goal of the season, at 2:00 of the second period, when a loose puck found him in the slot and he turned and swept it past Wild goaltender Filip Gustavsson. He also assisted on Werenski's power-play goal that made it 3-2 with 3:54 remaining.

And he was on the ice — with fellow youngsters Chinakhov and Fantilli, which was telling — with a minute to go as the Blue Jackets scrambled and scratched for the equalizer.

"It always feels good when you're playing your game and feeling good," Johnson said. "I'm not too surprised. I felt good in the preseason. Same hockey, just a bit better.

"Credit to the boys. They did a great job finding me. I always want the puck, but they're really finding me right now. It's a different system, too, where I can go to different places in the offensive zone. I think I'm finding the spots I want to go to better."

Werenski has had a front-row seat, of course, to the entirety of Johnson's NHL career. He watched the scrawny but crafty kid have an under-the-radar productive season as a rookie, and he watched him struggle from the start of his second season.

What does he see now?

"There's a lot of confidence there," Werenski said. "He's making plays. He had a really good summer. He wanted the puck on his hands all night, and he was making plays all night."

Johnson showed up at camp looking noticeably different. Off the ice, you can't miss how much thicker he is through the shoulders, chest and neck. On the ice, you can't miss how much quicker he's accelerating. There's a burst there that wasn't apparent previously.

That could be seen during two monster backchecks in the third period. On the first, he tracked down the Wild's Yakov Trenin on a breakaway and swatted his stick, altering his shot just before Trenin closed in on Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins.

In the closing seconds, with Merzlikins pulled for an extra skater, Johnson hounded a puck heading toward the Columbus net and stepped in front of a Wild skater to prevent the empty-net goal and possess the puck.

"(Johnson's) skating ability is out of this world," Evason said. "He's getting up and down the ice very confidently. He's playing extremely well."

There's a debate to be had about Johnson's handling last season under one-and-done coach Pascal Vincent.

Either Vincent deserves credit for showing Johnson no favors and forcing him to take the steps he's taken, or Vincent's leaning on Johnson — the healthy scratches, the demotion — was no way to treat a young player whose development is so important to the franchise.

Johnson was asked if he recalled how angered he was on opening night 2023.

"Yeah, it was frustrating," he said. "It's long gone now. Anything that happened last year, whether I agreed with it or not, you try to take it the right way and try to help it make me better."

The Blue Jackets head to Colorado for a game Saturday before returning to Columbus for Tuesday's home opener versus the Florida Panthers. Evason wants to make a couple of fixes before they face the Avalanche, but he'd like to bottle the effort he saw from his club Thursday.

In the first period, a Minnesota skater got behind the Blue Jackets defensively for threatening chances that the Jackets survived. That's likely a product of the Jackets' defensemen carrying the puck down low, as Evason wants them to do, and forwards not being quick enough to circle back to support the back end.

"We got the effort, we got the work, the visual of how we want to play," Evason said. "We need to score a couple more goals. We made a couple of mistakes, obviously, on a couple of the goals that happened. But I liked how hard we played."

Losing is never fun, of course. But it's not quite so bad when you can see the future without having to squint or rely on faith.

[The Athletic / Blue Jackets youngster Yegor Chinakhov lands big role following Boone Jenner's injury](#)

By Aaron Portzline- October 11, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It was an impressively structured and organized training camp under new Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason, with clearly defined roles and lines that were barely tweaked from one day to the next in the preseason.

But the Blue Jackets endured a major roster blow late last week when top-six forwards Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov suffered upper-body injuries that are going to keep them out of the lineup long-term, although the Blue Jackets have not made a timeline public for either player.

It led to significant upheaval up front with all four lines feeling the ripple effects of the injuries. There was a late wrinkle on defense, too, but it was performance-related, not caused by injuries.

As the 2024-25 regular-season opener arrives at 8 p.m. on Thursday — the Blue Jackets play the Minnesota Wild at Xcel Energy Center — we thought it might be helpful to reset the lines and pairs and provide some insights into what the strengths and struggles might be.

Forwards

Yegor Chinakhov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko

Insights: Chinakhov gets a big opportunity, moving up to the top line in the wake of Jenner's injury. It's a dramatically different line with Chinakhov, who is more of a shooter and less of a puck hog along the wall than Jenner. Still, Chinakhov could easily bloom into a 25-goal scorer if he sticks here.

This put significant pressure on Monahan, who now is charged with bringing along two young forwards on his flanks. He would have shared the faceoff dot with Jenner, too, but that's all on him now. It's a scoring line, but is it a line that can get out of its own end and sustain possession?

Marchenko has shown considerable progress in his efforts to possess and protect the puck, as well as his play in the defensive zone. His improvement in those areas is more important now than ever.

James van Riemsdyk – Adam Fantilli – Kevin Labanc

Insights: The new member here is Labanc, who spent training camp with the New Jersey Devils on a player tryout agreement before the Blue Jackets — after losing Jenner and Voronkov — came calling with a one-year, NHL contract. Labanc is an interesting player. He's had five seasons with double-digit goals, but fell to just two goals in 46 games last season with San Jose.

Here's Evason on Labanc: "I had a chat with him, and he said he wants to be a dog on a bone. He plays an aggressive game that gets after it. That's what I've seen on the opposing bench. He works and competes and battles. He's scored goals in his career, too."

Fantilli seems poised to be one of the NHL's breakout young players this year, and he's going to get every opportunity for big playing time and a big role on the power play. But does this line work? Labanc has offensive skill, but has struggled recently in his own zone. James van Riemsdyk is a big-body, down-low battler at this stage of his career.

Mikael Pyyhtiä – Cole Sillinger – Kent Johnson

Insights: The new face here is Pyyhtiä, who was seen as a long shot to make the final roster at the start of camp and ended up in a top-nine spot. Good on him, he had a great camp. Coaches appreciate that

he's positionally sound and plays a responsible two-way game, but is the moderate skill he's shown in the AHL going to translate?

Evason on Pyyhtiä: "He's an easy guy to like. (AHL Cleveland coach) Trent Vogelhuber said that as well. He's gotten better each day. He does a lot of little things right. He's a very intelligent hockey player who competes his butt off."

Johnson and Sillinger spent the summer training together, and that familiarity with each other's games has already shown itself in the preseason. It is tempting to keep them together — we get it — but Johnson's camp was so impressive you wonder if he might play his way up to the first or second line.

How will this line be used? Sillinger looks like he's ready to assert himself as a checking-line center, but that's not Johnson's game. Or Pyyhtiä's.

Zach Aston-Reese – Sean Kuraly – Mathieu Olivier

Insights: If you love a classic fourth line, look no further. Aston-Reese was claimed off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights just before the NHL rosters were set, bringing his un-fancy style to Columbus. He's a hard skater, a check-finisher and a willing fighter. He seems like an "Evason" guy.

Evason on Aston-Reese: "He's got a grit level to him that we really like. He's a lot bigger than I thought he was, too, just watching him on the ice today. He skates extremely well, too."

I could easily see Kuraly and Aston-Reese being the forwards on a penalty-killing unit. Kuraly is a known quantity in these parts. Hope he's ready for some greasy nights along with his linemates.

Olivier should be set free by Evason's system, which emphasizes pressuring the puck and being aggressive, even if it means taking risks. If the Jackets play that way, Olivier will be asked to work without his gloves, which he's perfectly comfortable doing.

Defense

Zach Werenski – Ivan Provorov

Insights: The whole back end shifted late in camp, at least in part because the coaching staff started to waver on David Jiříček's ability to play immediately on a top-two pair. Provorov, who had played left side with Jiříček on the second pair for most of camp, was moved to the right side and joined Werenski. Evason indicated Wednesday that the entire back end is fluid, so don't get wedded to these pairings.

Werenski dropped 10-12 pounds over the offseason by cutting most of the carbs and sugars out of his diet, he said. He's always been a quick, elusive blue liner but said he feels even more explosive now. He also said it makes playing 25-plus minutes feel a lot easier, which is a good thing. He's going to do it a lot this season.

Jake Christiansen – Damon Severson

This is a bigger shock, frankly, than Pyyhtiä making the final cut, but full marks to Christiansen for beating out two others — Jiříček and Jordan Harris — who clearly started camp ahead of him.

Christiansen feels like Evason's style — which allows defensemen to skate with the puck and join the rush, but relies on forwards to cover for them — may fit him better than whatever the system was the past two years. He's been an All-Star in the AHL, but this may be his best chance.

Severson is hoping to rebound from a difficult first year in Columbus. He started camp with Werenski on the top pair, but is now working with Christiansen.

Jack Johnson – Erik Gudbranson

There's a lot of size and muscle here. Johnson is built like an NFL middle linebacker; Gudbranson could pass for a tight end. Can they work together as a third pair? Ideally you'd like a puck-mover or a skater on this pairing to help move the puck out of danger, but let's see how it goes. These are two veteran players who, by now, know how they need to play in this league.

Goaltenders

Elvis Merzlikins

It likely won't calm too many nerves until he gets back to delivering in the regular season, but Merzlikins had a strong camp and preseason, turning in a .932 save percentage in three starts. Evason has vowed every player gets a "clean slate," and that might mean as much to Merzlikins as anybody.

Here's what Evason said of Merzlikins after Wednesday's practice: "I've seen a fantastic teammate who works his ass off every day. That's what we've asked him to do. We asked him to work. His competitiveness, and not just in the games, but in practices, too, it has certainly impressed me and the coaches, and I think his teammates really respect that, too."

Daniil Tarasov

At the start of camp, you wondered if Tarasov would find himself in a 50/50 split with Merzlikins or a more traditional 75/25 split between the starter and backup. Truly, it remains to be seen, as Evason has said he's going to play the hot hand. So far, that's been Merzlikins.

Tarasov, like Merzlikins, got three preseason starts. He lost two of those starts and had an .809 save percentage. Let's see what happens to both of these players when the games start counting.

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets drop season opener at Minnesota](#)

By Jessi Pierce- October 11, 2024

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- Matt Boldy had a goal and two assists, and the Minnesota Wild held off the Columbus Blue Jackets 3-2 at Xcel Energy Center on Thursday in the season opener for each team.

"I just want to win," Boldy said. "I think everyone in this locker room wants to win. We're so close. We all get along so well. (We're) competitive and we didn't have the year we expected last year, so all of us in here just want to win games and have a successful year."

Joel Eriksson Ek and Mats Zuccarello also scored, and Marcus Johansson had two assists for Minnesota. Filip Gustavsson made 31 saves, including stopping Yegor Sharangovich's slap shot from above the left face-off circle with 10 seconds left and Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins pulled for the extra attacker.

"It's a hard-fought game," Wild coach John Hynes said. "I think with a home opener on both sides, the first game, there's so much energy in the games that there wasn't a lot of free ice. You've got to be able to understand that when you're coming in the season, because the regular-season games are a step up. So, it was good."

Kent Johnson had a goal and an assist, and Zach Werenski scored for Columbus. Merzlikins made 23 saves.

"Not happy with the result but I feel like our body of work in that game and how we played, if we do that and that's the standard in our room, we're going to win a lot of hockey games," Werenski said. "So, definitely something to build on. We'd like to get two points, but that's how hockey goes sometimes."

It was Dean Evason's debut as Blue Jackets coach. The former Wild coach was hired on July 22, replacing Pascal Vincent. Evason was 147-77-27 in five seasons with Minnesota and 8-15 in the Stanley Cup Playoffs before being fired Nov. 27, 2023.

"Once you get back there, I think it's like [the] same as a player. I think you forget the surroundings and it's just like riding a bike," Evason said. "You fall back into a routine, and it was a lot of fun to be behind the bench. I don't care which one I'm on."

Boldy put the Wild up 1-0 at 17:51 of the first period with a snap shot from the right circle to the short side that got through a screened Merzlikins.

Johnson tied it 1-1 at 2:00 of the second period, spinning and scoring with a wrist shot from the right hash marks.

"Credit to the boys, I think they're doing a great job finding me," Johnson said. "I always want it, and they're finding me really good right now."

James van Riemsdyk, who was making his Blue Jackets debut, appeared to put Columbus ahead on the power play at 10:24 with a deflection at the edge of the crease, but the goal was overturned after the Wild challenged for goaltender interference.

Eriksson Ek then gave Minnesota a 2-1 lead at 16:35. He scored with a one-timer from the right hash marks after quick passes from Boldy and Johansson following a failed clearance by Columbus.

"I think 'Bolds' kind of looked first, but I wasn't really there yet," Eriksson Ek said. "And as soon as 'Jojo' got it, I saw he looked at me, so I kind of knew he was going to pass it. So, two good plays by them."

Zuccarello extended the lead to 3-1 on the power play at 9:58 of the third period, scoring from the right circle after Boldy fed him with a no-look pass.

Werenski brought the Blue Jackets to within 3-2 with his own power-play goal at 17:06, a one-timer from the right circle.

“I thought our team played really well tonight,” Werenski said. “Like we just said, if we play like that we’re going to win a lot of games. And that’s what winning hockey looks like and that’s fun hockey, so we’re going to build on it. We’re going to learn from some things we did wrong, but I think at the end of the day we have to play like that every night and it’s a good recipe for success.”

NOTES: Wild forward Kirill Kaprizov had an assist to give him a point in his fifth straight season opener, tying Mikko Koivu (2008-09 to 2012-13) for the longest streak in franchise history. ... Center Boone Jenner, the Blue Jackets captain, had surgery on his shoulder Wednesday and could be out for the season. The 31-year-old was injured in practice Oct. 4. General manager Don Waddell put the timeline for his recovery at “probably five or six months.” ... Van Riemsdyk was minus-1 with one blocked shot in 11:42 of ice time. The forward signed a one-year, \$900,000 contract with the Blue Jackets on Sept. 15.

The Hockey Writers / Steve Mears Excited & Ready To Be New Voice of Blue Jackets

By Mark Scheig- October 11, 2024

For the first time in 20 years, the Columbus Blue Jackets will have a new voice in the television booth. For Murrysville, PA's Steve Mears, it's a full-circle moment.

Mears was named as Jeff Rimer's replacement, who retired after last season. It was thanks to genuine hard work and working up the ranks that helped Mears to the Blue Jackets' seat.

That journey started at Bowling Green University. With stops in the Central Hockey League, the New York Islanders and the Pittsburgh Penguins among others, Mears now comes back to Ohio to lead the next era of Blue Jackets' hockey on TV.

Mears stopped by and chatted with the Hockey Writers about his journey and much more. From his beginnings in hockey to memories along the way and from his excitement about being in Columbus to what to expect from him, we cover it all in this 10 question and answer conversation.

You will see that Mears' preparation stands out. He hopes to bring excitement and fun to the broadcast. Here is our conversation.

Steve Mears Q&A

THW: Steve, just thinking about all the time that it took for you to get to this point, where did you get your hockey start from just a fan perspective? And then who did you look up to when you got that start?

Mears: "Well, I think just as with everybody, it starts with just being a fan. You're a fan of the game, and then you realize that maybe the best job outside of actually playing in the game, which of course for me was no possibility, was to be an announcer. And it's something that you could do for a long time. And it's something that's exciting. The thought of bringing the game to an audience, whether on TV or radio, is thrilling. So right away, it was like, wow. I get in for free and you get to talk to the players. You get to talk to the fans and the audience while bringing the game to life on radio or television. I just thought it was the coolest job in the world. So just right away wanted to take the steps necessary, really starting at age 10, to try to fulfill that dream of one day calling games in the NHL."

"Then you start looking up to various people in the business, and there have been so many of them over the years, whether it was Doc Emrick or Mike Lange or some of the great non-hockey announcers like Al Michaels and Joe Buck and Bob Costas. All of these people, they all had a hand in influencing you in some way. And then you just over the years develop your style, and here we are, a new chapter for me, and I'm excited."

THW: Then how were you able to break into the hockey industry knowing the interest that you had just that you talked about?

Mears: "Well, it's working your way up, almost like a player. You're going to college and you're honing your craft. I had the chance to go to Bowling Green, which is a terrific broadcasting school, and had an opportunity to get hands-on experience right away as a freshman and doing college hockey games, (Division 1) college hockey games with some future NHLers. What an unbelievably valuable experience that was just to get those reps and lay that foundation early on. So you work in college, and then you get a chance at a minor league team. And I packed up my car after I graduated from Bowling Green and moved down to Shreveport, Louisiana, and you get a chance in minor league hockey. And there, you

learn so much more than just broadcasting. You learn about the business side of the game and how the sports franchise is run and operated. Along the way, you make such wonderful friends, whether it was players or executives on the team or fans, many of which I keep in touch with to this day. You just get to know all of these people and these facets of sports. You just hope for your big break in the NHL, and I was lucky to get it with the New York Islanders.”

THW: Now your time in Pittsburgh, I think many will remember that because it was recent. Just when you think back to the time that you spent there, what memory will you have of that? And then ultimately, how did that time there make you a better broadcaster?

Mears: “I’ve definitely enjoyed living in Pittsburgh just with the hometown connection and everything. I think the most memorable aspect of it is the players that I got to cover. I got to cover first and foremost, Sidney Crosby, who always treated me with such class. And to watch him on a daily basis, how he approaches the sport and approaches his craft, that is inspirational. It really is. And then all the other ones, whether it was Evgeni Malkin or Phil Kessel or Erik Karlsson or Jake Guentzel. The star power that they had there and the players that I got to watch on a nightly basis, that’s really what stands out the most for me. But now I’m really excited to get this new opportunity with Columbus and to be living in Ohio again, which is where I started, and it’s just come full circle here. This is the place where I first did a hockey game. The first time I was on the radio was in Ohio. The first time I called a hockey game was in Ohio. So it’s really come full circle and I just can’t wait to get started.”

THW: What specifically was appealing to you when the Blue Jackets opportunity became open?

Mears: “Well, the city has always been one of my favorites where whether it was coming in as a visitor, which I’ve probably done more than any other road city in the NHL. This is the one I’ve been to the most. And whether it was when I was at Bowling Green or here for the all All-Star Game in 2015, this has always been one of my absolute favorite cities. And then you start looking into the organization and how they treat people. And then you start seeing the fan base. And as a broadcaster, you just want to work somewhere where you have that type of passion, that market. And I’ve been lucky enough. All three stops in the NHL, the fan bases have been unbelievable. Long Island with the Islanders, Pittsburgh with the Penguins, and now here in Columbus.”

“It is a really special place. And now I’m seeing it firsthand because you see it from an outsider’s perspective as a visitor, and you come in and you stay downtown, and you know the arena and might go to dinner in the hotel area. But now to really get in and get to know the people and to see the surrounding areas, this is one of the best markets in the NHL and also the fact that it’s a young up and coming team that I think has a lot of potential that’s building the right way through the draft with a lot of terrific young pieces. I’m just so excited for the present and the future in covering this team.”

THW: They always say it’s hard to replace a legend. And Jeff Rimer was certainly that when it came to the Blue Jackets’ broadcasting booth. Talk about being able to step in right after somebody like that who was a staple for so many years in that broadcast booth.

Mears: “It’s an honor to take the torch from someone like that who set such a high standard for so many years and not just with the Blue Jackets, but with a four decade plus career in the NHL and in sports broadcasting. And he has been so incredibly gracious with his time and offering any assistance that I need. Just a valuable resource for me. I just spoke with him a few days ago, and he wished me well and said if there’s anything that I need, he’s just a phone call or a text away. And I just can’t tell you how much I appreciate that. And I do understand it’ll be an adjustment period for a lot of fans who are watching because it doesn’t matter who the person is. If they’ve done it for 20 years, there’s that comfort level as a fan. I know it because I’ve lived it as a fan. When there’s change, I think there’s an

adjustment period. I understand that. I totally get it, but our goal is to be one of the best broadcasts in the NHL.”

“I’ve got a wonderful color analyst in Jody Shelley who’s one of the best in the business. And I think at this point now in my career, I’ve got a good amount of experience that I can draw from having done hundreds of games and started when I was 26 years old. So now it’s like I’m tapping into my different stops along the way and trying to lean on that experience that I could bring and hope the fans enjoy it.”

THW: You just mentioned him, Jody Shelley. You guys will be working together. You’ve gotten to know him a little bit now. What were your first impressions of Jody Shelley?

Mears: “Just very diligent with his preparation. I knew that for a long time, but then to now see it firsthand, the way he prepares for this season, the way he prepares for a game, and the conversations, the notetaking that he’s getting done right now just to prep for that opening night. That’s what makes him one of the best in the business. It’s not a case where I played, so I don’t need to do the homework. He does the above and beyond level of homework, and then that’s what makes him one of the best. I love that approach. I’m kind of the same way when it comes to doing the homework and the preparation. I take a lot of pride in that. I think when you have two people who are making that type of commitment, it should all add up to a great show. And with Jody, he’s always been one of my favorite people in the game because of all the games over the years at morning skates. Our paths have crossed so much. We’ve had so many conversations, and he always has his finger on the pulse of the team.”

“If I ever had a question about the Blue Jackets, I knew I could reach out to him, whether as a player, what’s really going on with the team, what’s the vibe with the team right now. I knew I could always tap into him because he knew exactly what was going on. And he was almost a 100% accurate with any type of an assessment when I had those conversations with him at morning skates or at 5:00 before a game. I think that’s what makes him one of the best. It’s nice to know that as a play-by-play guy, you could just kind of sit back. My job is to tee him up to make sure he shines because he’s the expert and he’s the former player. I think that’s the really important role of the two in television. He’s the one doing the replays, and my job is to set him up to shine and to really tap into his expertise.”

THW: Steve, what do you really feel like makes a good broadcaster? You mentioned some of the guys that you looked up to over the years, and they all have something that just makes them great. What in your mind makes a great hockey broadcaster?

Mears: “I think you have to start with the nuts and bolts, and that begins with the preparation. The best announcers in any sport are the most well prepared. It starts with the preparation and going through not just stats, but storylines and background stories and what really is the trend of the team, the arc of a season, what’s happening with not just one team, but two. It reminds me of the great Jiggs McDonald when I did my first NHL game, he was doing Islanders TV at the time. I asked him for advice, and he said never forget. It takes two teams to play this game, Steve. It takes two teams. Just knowing both sides, just having a good grasp on the main storylines of any given game and then bringing the requisite amount of passion and excitement, knowing the rules and also having fun. I think if we’re not having fun on our end, it can’t be fun on the viewer’s end. So Jody and I, we’re going to have a good time, and I think it has to be that way because as a general manager once said to me, we’re not building rockets here. It is a profession and a medium where you better be having fun and make it fun for the audience. I think we’re going to do that.”

THW: You guys will have the task of being the first voice that the Blue Jackets’ fans are going to hear in the new season given everything that has happened. So just how much thought have you guys put into first going on the air, just given the circumstances?

Mears: "It's been a tough six weeks for the organization. I think the word that comes to mind is authenticity, just speaking from the heart when it comes to Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. Just the adversity that everyone has gone through here over these last six weeks just to tap into what the community was able to do as we leaned on each other during this time, I think that is something we'll always remember. Whether it was the makeshift memorial right away, almost instantly outside Nationwide Arena at the candlelight vigil a few days later or just as training camp started talking with fans and grieving in different ways."

"I may be the new guy, but it doesn't take very long for someone to see just how close knit this Columbus community is. And I think that was on full display over the last month and a half when we all helped each other get through this. And that is an ongoing process, and we'll continue to do so. On the broadcast, we'll continue to acknowledge it. Just as the team has said, one thing they're going to do is have Johnny's presence visible in the locker room and we will continue to do that at the same time, persevering and doing what Johnny would have wanted, which is playing hockey and getting to all of our different jobs and celebrating life and celebrating the game."

THW: You got to watch training camp. You got to see a lot of different things. Just what stood out to you in your initial just viewings of this Blue Jackets training camp?

Mears: "Well, I love the young talent. I think that's the biggest thing with this team and thinking about the present and the future, whether it's Kent Johnson's training camp or Adam Fantilli watching him score a hat trick in Washington. Aside from pretty much one game last year, this was the first close-up look that I've had a chance to watch Adam Fantilli's game because I've watched it on TV. And then we did one Pittsburgh/Columbus game last year I believe, so before he was injured. Just to see him and his skill set and just the way he's able to take over a game, just dominate, that really excites me. And then there are other great young players. Denton Mateychuk is one who really stood out at training camp and his future is really bright. Then to augment that with these veteran players who have a ton of experience that are going to be so helpful to the young guys."

"Then you throw in a coach like Dean Evison who is going to demand a very high level of work ethic, structure and accountability. That's the one thing I asked him. I said, what are the non-negotiables? What are the values? There are a billion things you could pick there, and the first word he said was accountability. It's something when you make a mistake, you own up to it. I just love what I saw from him. He kept it positive, but it was still on the strict side and adhering to those values like accountability and structure and so forth. But throughout the training camp, they kept it very positive and very loose. It was a nice mixture. I love the approach that he took in dealing with the players and the practices, the exhibition games, and everything. He just brings a ton of experience, and I thought that was just a wonderful hire by Don Waddell to get that type of a coaching here for this team at this time."

THW: Last one for you Steve is just what is your message to the fans? And specifically, what do you want them to know about you?

Mears: "Just thank you for welcoming me so warmly. I had a chance during the whole preseason, every single one of those games, to go down to the cannon and meet several fans and walk through the building because we weren't televising the games. What a luxury that was actually, just to spend that time and it afforded me a chance to just go and meet great Blue Jackets' fans, long-time season-ticket holders, some of them from Day 1. And to be back here in Ohio where I started and to be covering this team, to be a part of the community, whether it was neighbors in our neighborhood or just fans or going to a restaurant or anyone that might recognize me, they've been so incredibly warm and welcoming. And I will always appreciate that."

“I just would say thank you. And it’s going to be a great season. And again, we’ll lean on each other as we have during these times. And I would love to, someday as we all have that dream of a Stanley Cup parade down Nationwide Boulevard. That’s my dream as well. I just can’t wait to get started. The main thing would be thank you for welcoming me and us into your homes. And just know that every single night, we will bring that level of dedication. There are no nights off. We will bring the same level of passion and dedication that’s expected of the players. That’s the same amount that we expect as far as doing the homework and bringing our A-game every night. And I do expect the Blue Jackets to be one of, if not the hardest working teams in the NHL this season. I would love for fans to recognize that the broadcast team will be at the same work-ethic level because I think that’s what makes a successful broadcast.”

The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets Announce That Captain Boone Jenner Had Shoulder Surgery

By Jason Newland- October 11, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets Captain was injured in practice on October 4th

The Jackets have announced that Boone Jenner had shoulder surgery yesterday in Colorado.

GM Don Waddell provided a statement via a press release.

“Boone Jenner had successful shoulder surgery on Wednesday. He’ll begin his rehabilitation very soon and our hope is he can return before the end of the season,” said Waddell. “His loss will be felt by our club, but we have a strong leadership group in place and players will be given an opportunity to take on greater roles on and off the ice.”

Per Jeff Svoboda, "Dmitri Voronkov does not need surgery on his upper body injury. Hope he can return by the end of November."

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day 1: Elvis Merzlikins Gets The Nod In Net For The Blue Jackets' Opener Against The Minnesota Wild

By Ed Francis- October 11, 2024

After a brutal offseason, the Columbus Blue Jackets take the ice to begin the 2024-25 season Thursday night when they take on the Minnesota Wild.

The summer turned tragic Aug. 29 when forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew were killed in an alleged drunk-driving incident. The team will wear a special helmet decal for the entire season and the Wild will hold a moment of silence for Johnny and Matthew before the game.

Thursday's game will be the first chance for Columbus to play in Johnny's memory and spirit, as the team has said they'll strive to do.

Here's what else to know as the Blue Jackets take the ice for the first of 82 regular-season games.

COLUMBUS	SEASON STATS	MINNESOTA
—	GOALS FOR	—
—	GOALS AGAINST	—
—	POWER PLAY	—
—	PENALTY KILL	—
—	SHOTS FOR	—
—	SHOTS AGAINST	—
MINNESOTA'S LAST THREE GAMES (PRESEASON)		
SUN, 9/29	vs. Stars	L, 4-2
TUE, 10/1	vs. Blackhawks	W, 7-2

COLUMBUS	SEASON STATS	MINNESOTA
FRI, 10/4	@ Blackhawks	W, 6-1
MINNESOTA'S TEAM LEADERS		
GOALS	—	—
ASSISTS	—	—
POINTS	—	—
ODDS & PROJECTIONS		
CBJ WIN PER MONEYPUCK:		30%

BETESPN ODDS: CBJ +220

WHAT TO KNOW:

- Elvis Merzlikins will get the start between the pipes for the Blue Jackets, per head coach Dean Evason. Merzlikins was steady throughout the preseason and was rewarded with the opening night nod.
- Evason will be coaching his first regular-season game with the Blue Jackets. He previously coached the Wild until his dismissal last fall. Does that make this game extra important to Evason? "We're going to the team that fired me, and we're playing them the first game. Sure, it's important," Evason told Bob McElligott on The Inside Edge. "But is it more important than game 14 to win? No."
- The Blue Jackets had a four-game homestand to start the 2023-24 season, but their first road game of last season was also against the Minnesota Wild. They won 5-4 in overtime, with Adam Fantilli scoring his first career goal. The second-year player has looked excellent in camp and the exhibition games after a season-ending injury last season limited him to 49 games — look for big things in his elevated role as the definitive second-line center.
- Lines are fluid, but here's the expectation of how they start Thursday night. With news out Thursday that captain Boone Jenner will be out for at least most of the season, it will be 23-year-

old Yegor Chinakhov with the first opportunity to take Jenner's role as the top line winger opposite of Kirill Marchenko. Newcomers James van Riemsdyk and Kevin Labanc will give Fantilli a veteran presence on the second line. The duo has 1,489 combined games of NHL experience (van Riemsdyk 1,011; Labanc 478).

On defense, Jake Christiansen has been bumped to the second pairing and plays along Damon Severson. Evason liked his aggressive style through training camp. Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson get the nod as the third pairing over Jordan Harris and David Jiricek; veterans over youth for opening night, it seems.

Full line projections:

LW		C		RW	
59	Yegor Chinakhov	23	Sean Monahan	82	Kirill Marchenko
21	James van Riemsdyk	19	Adam Fantilli	62	Kevin Labanc
82	Mikael Pyyhtia	4	Cole Sillinger	91	Kent Johnson
27	Zach Aston-Reese	7	Sean Kuraly	24	Mathieu Olivier
LD		RD			
8	Zach Werenski	9	Ivan Provorov		
2	Jake Christiansen	78	Damon Severson		
3	Jack Johnson	44	Erik Gudbranson		
Starting Goalie		Back-Up Goalie			
90	Elvis Merzlikins	40	Daniil Tarasov		

1st Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Come Up Short, Fall 3-2 To Wild In Season Opener

By Ed Francis- October 11, 2024

Progress.

The Columbus Blue Jackets came up short in the season-opener, falling 3-2 to the Minnesota Wild on Thursday night.

But if game one of 82 was any indication, this is a team that has made huge strides since last season.

Here's how it all went down:

1st Period

(0:43): The Wild almost struck in the first minute after Jake Middleton used the boards to find a breaking Matt Boldy just past the Columbus blue line. Zach Werenski stuck with him and got his stick in there just enough to prevent Boldy from getting off much of a shot.

(15:15): The first power play of the season comes to the Blue Jackets after Cole Sillinger draws a tripping penalty that goes against Minnesota's Marcus Foligno. The penalty is short-lived, lasting just :30 seconds before Sillinger commits a hooking penalty to make it a 1:30 4-on-4. There was some brief confusion on the Columbus side, with Merzlikins momentarily skating to the bench to give the Blue Jackets an extra attacker before realizing the penalty was going against his team. Disaster averted.

COLUMBUS	GAME STATS	MINNESOTA
33	SHOTS	26
45.8%	FACEOFF %	54.2%
1 / 3	POWER PLAY	1 / 3
2 / 3	PENALTY KILL	2 / 3
20	HITS	14
15	GIVEAWAYS	11
1	TAKEAWAYS	2

COLUMBUS	GAME STATS	MINNESOTA
8	BLOCKED SHOTS	18
DATA VIA ESPN		

(17:36): Huge stop by Elvis, gloving a one-timer from point-blank range by Mats Zuccarello. A beautiful no-look pass from Kirill Kaprizov set it up, but Merzlikins was in prime position to make the difficult save as the Wild power play entered its final seconds.

(17:51 — 1-0 MIN): Just as the Minnesota power play comes to an end, Minnesota makes it 1-0. Boldy finds the back of the net this time, getting a shot past Merzlikins who was screened by the Wild's Joel Eriksson Ek.

2nd Period

(2:00 — Tied 1-1): The Blue Jackets waste no time in the second frame tying it up, with Kent Johnson making it a 1-1 game at exactly 2:00. Great effort here by Johnson to pick up the loose puck and fire it past the stick side of Minnesota goalie Filip Gustavsson. Sillinger and Damon Severson pick up the assists.

(5:51): Johnson goes off on a tripping minor to give the Wild their second power play of the night. The Blue Jackets successfully kill the penalty — but barely. Merzlikins sprawled out for a save near the mid-point of the penalty kill and a quirky bounce off the boards put the puck right in front of the net before Elvis could get back to his feet. A pair of Wild skaters were ready to put it in, but Sillinger swept the puck away before they could do it.

(10:24): Minnesota goes off for the second time in the game, a too many men penalty after the Wild decided to roll with six skaters for several seconds. James van Riemsdyk briefly was credited with a goal during the power play, but it was rightly reversed on a Wild challenge for goaltender interference.

(17:35 — 2-1 MIN): In a period largely dominated by the Blue Jackets, it's the Wild who regain the lead in the final minutes of the second period after a misplay by Adam Fantilli. The young center fanned on a clearing attempt, which allowed Minnesota to keep the puck in the zone and Eriksson Ek scored to make it 2-1 Wild.

3rd Period

(3:51): The Blue Jackets catch the Wild in a line change and Werenski nearly ties it, but Gustavsson makes a great save to maintain the Minnesota lead. This was an intelligent sequence of hockey from the Blue Jackets, despite not skating away with the goal.

(9:58 — 3-1 Wild): With just 11 seconds left in a Sean Monahan crosschecking minor, Zuccarello connects on a wrister to make it 3-1 Wild. Really good puck movement from Minnesota here. Boldy gets his second assist and third point of the night and Kaprizov gets the secondary assist.

(17:06 — 3-2 Wild): Werenski halves the Minnesota lead with a power play goal after Middleton flips the puck over the glass for a delay of game penalty. Johnson dangled it in the slot, dropped it back to Yegor Chinakhov who found Werenski for the 84mph one-timer past the glove-side of Gustavsson.

(THE FINAL MINUTE): Columbus had a few really good chances to tie it late, particularly from Fantilli and Chinakhov, but Gustavsson came up with key saves in the final seconds to deny a tying goal from the Blue Jackets.

Next Up

The Blue Jackets stay on the road for one more before Tuesday's home opener. They'll face the Colorado Avalanche with a 9:00 p.m. start from Denver.

The Hockey News / Cleveland Monsters Make A Pair Of Roster Moves

By Jason Newland- October 11, 2024

The Cleveland Monsters have announced a pair of moves today.

They have signed Roman Ahcan to a PTO. Ahcan, who had previously just signed with the ECHL's Savannah Ghost Pirates, will be making his second stop with Cleveland. He's played 146 games in his Monsters career and has 43 points. The Savage, Minnesota native has yet to play an NHL Game.

They also have sent goalie Pavel Čajan to the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones. Čajan played in 6 games for the Cyclones last season, going 2-3-1 with a .902 save %. His career record with Cleveland is 16-18-6.

The Monsters will be going with Jet Greaves and Zach Sawchenko to start their season.

The Athletic / Who has edge for Canada's 4 Nations net? Don Sweeney: 'We're going to evaluate each and every game'

By Pierre LeBrun- October 11, 2024

Ken Dryden. Grant Fuhr. Ed Belfour. Patrick Roy. Martin Brodeur. Roberto Luongo. Carey Price.

Think of Team Canada and best-on-best competition dating back to the '72 Summit Series, and well, it's been a who's who of Hockey Hall of Famers and Vezina Trophy winners and Stanley Cup champions to pick from in net.

Oh sure, there's been controversy. Luongo replacing Brodeur as the starter midway through the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver. The late Pat Quinn famously swapping out his own Leafs goalie Curtis Joseph in favor of Brodeur in Salt Lake City in 2002. Roy getting cut from the '87 Canada Cup team.

It's never boring.

But those were debates revolving around the very top goalies in the world.

The post-Price era in net for Team Canada is not at that level. Which doesn't mean there aren't good options, nor does it mean Team Canada can't win the 4 Nations in February or the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy. Look at the rest of the lineup to know why Team Canada can still win.

But it's not the same as it's been at a rather key position.

The candidates right now are Jordan Binnington, Stuart Skinner, Adin Hill, Sam Montembeault, Darcy Kuemper, Connor Ingram, Cam Talbot, Logan Thompson and Tristan Jarry.

I'd love to see a world in which 39-year-old Marc-Andre Fleury, the future Hockey Hall of Famer, gets into the picture. But I don't think that's realistic.

There just aren't that many Canadian goalies in the NHL anymore. Which is a story for another day.

But in the here and now, one can already feel the angst that's building among Canadian hockey fans regarding this particular situation ahead of the 4 Nations.

"I don't think we share that same angst," Team Canada 4 Nations general manager Don Sweeney told The Athletic on Thursday. "We've got guys that have proven they can win at the highest level. And we'll have guys that are going to play well as we're going through it. So I don't think we quite see things the same way (as media and fans).

"Where we sit right now, we're pretty pretty confident in the group we're evaluating and the chance that we're going to have to win."

There's some winning pedigree in the group to be sure, led by Binnington's tremendous 2019 Stanley Cup performance, as well as Cup wins by Hill in '23, Kuemper in '22, world championship gold for Montembeault two years ago, and Skinner falling one win short of a Cup win for Edmonton last spring.

This is a real competition for those three goalie jobs Team Canada will name by Dec. 2 for 4 Nations. None of these goalies have a Hockey Hall of Fame resume.

So when Montembeault opened the season with a monster performance against the Maple Leafs, Binnington was awesome in Seattle, and on the flip side Skinner was yanked in his season opener, it's easy to get caught up in that wide-open Team Canada goalie competition.

“We’re not going to overreact,” cautioned Sweeney. “We’re taking the longer-term perspective. ... But we’re confident in the group of guys that we have. We’re going to evaluate each and every game they play and make the best decision.”

Obviously, Sweeney wouldn’t tip his hand, but I have to think Binnington has the inside track right now. He’s got the most polished pedigree over the last half decade.

After that, it’s anyone’s guess.

For any of these guys, the 4 Nations could be a career-changer, especially if it leads to a gig on the Olympic team in ’26.

“I’m definitely aware of it,” Binnington, who played for Canada at the worlds last spring, told The Athletic’s Jeremy Rutherford on Thursday. “At the same time, I feel like I understand that giving my best every day and performing and taking care of what I can control will lead to whatever may come. So that’s my focus.

“Obviously, you’re aware of the big picture and it would be a great honor and a privilege to suit up with the Canadian leaf on your jersey. Other than that, nothing changes. It’s the same old story every day, doing what I can.”

It just so happens that Blues GM Doug Armstrong is also Team Canada’s Olympic GM and is working in concert with Sweeney on the 4 Nations process.

So Binnington doesn’t need to wonder which eyes are on him, Team Canada-wise. But the reality, Sweeney said, is that the management group is evaluating every single Canadian NHL goalie. All their games are being watched, one way or another.

Of course, there’s an A list and a B list and so on, but those names can jump up and jump down over the next seven weeks.

Seven weeks to make one final impression before the Dec. 2 roster deadline.

“Obviously, it would be a goal for me,” Montembeault told The Athletic’s Habs beat writer, Arpon Basu, in an interview on the eve of camp. “Because those are the players in that (4 Nations) tournament that will mostly be going to the Olympics the year after that. So it’s always going to be in the back of my mind.

“I don’t want to think about it too much, but obviously it would be great to represent your country. So it’s going to be important for me to have a good start to the season for sure.”

Skinner had his ups and downs in last season’s playoffs but overall showed impressive moxie in where he got his team. Can he be more consistent this season? Will it lead to a Team Canada nod?

“I don’t really think too much of it just because it’s pretty far down the line,” Skinner told The Athletic’s Oilers beat writer, Daniel Nugent-Bowman, before the season. “It’s nice hearing your name, but it doesn’t solidify anything. Nothing’s written in stone. There’s a lot of games for me to play — and to play well. Ultimately, it’s not so much to play in the 4 Nations. It’s more so trying to make the playoffs and trying to make a run for the Cup.

“If it happens, it’ll be an absolute honor and privilege. I’m just looking to play my best.”

Hill was brilliant for Vegas in that Cup run in ’23 but took a step back last season with injuries and inconsistency. For sure he’s thinking about the chance at hand for Canada.

“Any time you can put on the Team Canada sweater, it’s an honor, right?” he told The Athletic’s Golden Knights beat writer, Jesse Granger, recently. “I got to do it once in the world championship, and we were lucky enough to win gold. I’d love to.”

Each goalie’s career body of work carries a lot of sway, but the next seven weeks still matter, too, as far as getting the freshest information.

“Absolutely,” Sweeney said. “The goaltender position is no different than any other player. We’ve got a group of guys we’re evaluating. Sometimes you’ve got a young guy emerging as he goes through the league. Some of those things are factors. Who’s playing well? Who are the best players for us when we go to make that decision?”

Team Canada did a lot of leg work this summer with the management group and coaches looking over the options. They’re not starting the season with an empty canvas.

“We have to keep a wide angle on this,” Sweeney said. “The body of work at any position will matter — what they’ve done over the course of their careers and what they’re currently doing. That’s how we’re going to evaluate.”

There’s also this important distinction. While three goalies are getting named on Dec. 2, there’s another two months to evaluate which goalie should start the opener in Montreal on Feb. 12.

They’re not naming their No. 1 goalie on Dec. 2. Why would you? Use the time.

“You’re 100 percent correct on that front,” Sweeney said. “The evaluation will not stop. In some cases, God forbid for any of these 4 Nations teams, you have injuries and such and somebody else might get an opportunity.

“So yes, we’ll name our team but then we won’t stop trying to have an understanding of who is playing the best.”

And for what that means in goal for Canada is likely a last-minute call going with the hot hand.

The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 season first impressions: What matters and what doesn't for several teams

By Eric Duhatschek- October 11, 2024

Reading too much into NHL opening-night performances is about as misguided as taking anything away from the first week of the NFL season. It's always a cautionary tale. Just about every player who matters tip-toed through the exhibition season, trying not to get hurt. Players are rusty. Chemistry is evolving. Systems tweaked in training camp need time to become intuitive.

Ray Ferraro, the busiest man in hockey this week who called three games in three cities over a 48-hour period, summed it up best, heading into overtime of what finished as a wild 6-5 win by the Calgary Flames over the Vancouver Canucks on Wednesday night: "This is October hockey. Sloppy. Goalies fighting for their lives out there. Month by month, the game gets tighter and tighter."

All you really get is a glimpse of what could be. Still, glimpses can be illustrative and maybe the most interesting point of comparison is how the two teams that played for the Stanley Cup last June fared in their respective openers.

The fact that the Florida Panthers looked so good on opening night against the stumbling and fumbling Boston Bruins was impressive. Many times, on banner-raising night, a team can be distracted. You've just received your Stanley Cup rings. It's one last chance to bask in the glow of what you accomplished last year before you have to put in all the hard work to give yourself a chance to do it again.

Florida, as most defending champions do in the cap era, had to tweak the bottom end of its roster because contributing players depart via free agency — and you can't pay everybody, so you need to be selective in how you allocate your cash.

There were half a dozen new faces in the Panthers' lineup, but the only player of significant consequence who moved on was Brandon Montour, now in Seattle. Oliver Ekman-Larsson was a useful contributor, especially early last season, when injuries to Montour and Aaron Ekblad forced him to play top-four minutes. Against the Bruins, the Panthers debuted a new fourth line and a new supporting cast on defense. But the core remained the same.

Sergei Bobrovsky had a Bobrovsky-like night in goal — which is to say he played well enough to win. Maybe the best news of all came postgame, when the Panthers announced Carter Verhaeghe, a pending unrestricted free agent, had signed an eight-year extension worth \$7 million per year to effectively stay a Panther for life.

That leaves Sam Bennett, who had a two-goal performance on opening night, and franchise icon Ekblad needing to secure new deals. It may come down to either/or between Bennett and Ekblad. If you strip the emotion out of it — because Ekblad has been a Panther for his entire career — it should be a relatively easy choice, given how important Bennett seems to be in the heart of that lineup, and as the perfect foil to Matthew Tkachuk.

Benny said I'M BAAAACKKK  pic.twitter.com/sVnIU4hQhH

— Florida Panthers (@FlaPanthers) October 9, 2024

Bennett started living up to the promise of being a fourth-overall draft pick once he got to Florida, after he couldn't quite find a fit in his first NHL home Calgary. You'd have to think staying as part of the Panther core will be a priority.

Certainly, the way he played in his season debut showed a great desire to make this his permanent NHL residence.

But mostly the Panthers looked collectively fast, quick in transition and hard on the forecheck — the signature elements, in other words, of what went right for them last year.

Edmonton, by contrast, looked completely out of sorts. The Oilers, the Canucks and the Avalanche all shared one common shortcoming in their respective openers: an inability to keep the puck out of their own net. In Edmonton's case, recent history is on their side. The Oilers got clobbered in the opener vs. Winnipeg Wednesday night, in the same way they got clobbered in the opener a year ago against Vancouver. Eventually they made it to within a single win of the Stanley Cup eight months later.

So it can be done. Edmonton is proof. The Oilers lost nine of their first 12 last season, a start that ultimately cost coach Jay Woodcroft his job. Everything changed after Kris Knoblauch took over behind the bench. That's not a script you want to follow again.

I've long believed the so-called Stanley Cup hangover tends to apply to the losers of the final more so than the winners, because they are the ones that must nurse the pain of coming close and not getting it done all summer. How you deal with it is critical, and generally tells you something about the leadership group. That was Florida two years ago. The Panthers channeled the disappointment in the right way.

That's Edmonton's challenge. One game? It doesn't matter. There's time to get it right. And the good news is, it wasn't as if there wasn't a lot of blame to share.

The Oilers were bad on all fronts vs. the Jets. Stuart Skinner gave up five goals in fewer than 40 minutes and ended up giving way to Calvin Pickard. The big guns came up empty — and the commitment to playing 200-foot hockey clearly wasn't there. It looked as if the Oilers were still operating in preseason mode, while the Jets came ready to play.

No matter how talented a team is or isn't on paper, motivated play can often tip the balance in a single game.

Also, it's easy to forget the Jets were a 110-point team last season, second-best in the conference and six points better than the Oilers over an 82-game regular season. And yet Edmonton seems to be a common pick for the Stanley Cup, while Winnipeg is thought to be good enough to fight it out for a wild-card spot behind the big three in the Central — Dallas, Colorado and Nashville. Expectations have been lowered — not a bad thing really, since teams love playing without pressure. But it is an odd development, considering the Jets mostly ran back the same team with Scott Arniel now behind the bench.

If the Atlantic is the class of the Eastern Conference, the Central is by far the stronger of the two divisions in the West.

It does feel as if it could be a year when five Central teams make the playoffs and only three emerge from the Pacific. Edmonton will be one, no matter how bad they looked in the opener, because there's lots of time to fix the problems that emerged on the first night.

But Winnipeg did a lot to convince you the regular season they had a year ago was no fluke and could easily be used as a springboard to getting into the playoffs again.

Florida, meanwhile, is bidding to become just the second team to qualify for three consecutive Stanley Cup Finals since the mid-'80s.

Tampa did it most recently between 2020 and 2022. Before that, though, you have to go back to the era of NHL dynasties. Edmonton made three trips in a row to the Final from 1983 to 1985 and the Islanders, of course, won four championships in a row from 1980 to 1983.

Eventually, the toll of all those short summers can catch up with a team, and maybe that's the one reason for pumping the brakes on the Panthers for now. There's a long way to go between Oct. 9 and whatever day in the third week of June that the 2025 season ends. The danger will be simply not running out of gas.

Blackhawks rising

Edmonton's next chance to get right comes Saturday against the Chicago Blackhawks, which for the last couple of seasons seemed like a free space on the bingo card. But Chicago is a different club than a year ago — and you almost wonder if the Blackhawks went overboard in supplementing last year's too-young and too-inexperienced roster by adding all those experienced pieces.

Five teams entered the new season with 10,000 or more games of NHL experience on their rosters. Edmonton was No. 1, at 11,392 games played. Chicago, surprisingly, was second (10,748) followed by Pittsburgh, Carolina and Toronto. Buffalo is officially the youngest team in the league, with an average age of 25.3, followed by Montreal, Utah and Philadelphia.

Edmonton is the oldest at 30.3. The Blackhawks' average age is 29.2, the same as Tampa Bay. On opening night, the Chicago youth movement up front was pretty much limited to 19-year-old Connor Bedard, who was excellent. Philipp Kurashev was the next youngest forward at 24. On defense, you had two youngsters, 23-year-old Alex Vlasic and 21-year-old Nolan Allan, a first-round draft choice from 2021 who spent all of last season playing for AHL Rockford. Bedard seemed to be showing early chemistry with Teuvo Teräväinen, one of those consistent, smart, underrated pros who might be their smartest pick-up of the season.

But all that experience made them look like a tougher out. Though he didn't figure on the scoresheet, Taylor Hall, coming off last year's major knee injury, looked good. He played 17:28 and looked to be driving play on the second line with Kurashev at center and Tyler Bertuzzi at wing. Hall is just 32 and though there's been a lot of water under the bridge since his MVP season in 2017-18 with the Devils, as recently as the 2021-22 season, playing for Boston, he managed 61 points.

The payoff in patience

Speaking of Ferraro, who also covered the first and third games of ESPN's doubleheader Tuesday, he made an interesting point early about Pavel Buchnevich, who the Blues are trying at center after an NHL career mostly playing the wing. According to Ferraro, playing center is much harder than the wing because it requires heightened awareness on every shift and completely different defensive responsibilities (not to mention an ability to win faceoffs) and as a result, few can effectively make that transition late in a player's career.

The Blues had a stumbling first period versus Seattle, which led to Buchnevich having a couple of shifts on wing toward the end. But in the end, coach Drew Bannister restored his preseason lines and Buchnevich was back in the middle with Jordan Kyrou on the wing. Kyrou scored twice, the Blues rallied and then hung on for the win, largely because Jordan Binnington was good again in goal.

Blink and all of a sudden Jordan Kyrou has two goals. #stlblues pic.twitter.com/x1L8cHdSHK

— St. Louis Blues (@StLouisBlues) October 8, 2024

But the Buchnevich experiment reminded me of a time when a position switch to center did work — and that involved Elias Lindholm, who was drafted as a center by Carolina, struggled to find a place in the Hurricanes lineup and was eventually traded to Calgary, where he thrived on the right wing. But because Lindholm had the hockey IQ to play center, the Flames eventually moved him to the middle — and then stuck with it long enough for him to fully make the transition. In the beginning, he was playing too

hesitantly, which happens when you're thinking too much on the ice. Eventually, he started processing the game faster and it just became natural, playing on instinct.

Lindholm got his payday this summer from Boston, largely because of that position switch. The Bruins were desperate for help down the middle after the Patrice Bergeron and David Krejčí retirements. Lindholm was attractive just because he developed into one of the more accomplished centers in the league. That only happens if a coaching staff can demonstrate the necessary patience to see a position switch through.

Mostly, they are so focused on winning now that the experiments generally don't last. This Buchnevich experiment will be worth monitoring. I expect to see a lot of back and forth before they finally decide if it's working — or if it isn't.

Speaking of Calgary

When the Flames signed Jake Bean this summer and then Tyson Barrie to a contract after he had a successful PTO with the team in camp, the expectation was one or both would eventually end up anchoring the team's power play, because both are known for their offensive chops but have weaknesses in their defensive games. It's been proven players like that can find a place in the NHL — Erik Gustafsson seems to land with a new team every year, and Shayne Gostisbehere has become an upgraded version of that. But when Calgary's season opened Wednesday, Barrie was in the press box, Bean on the third pair and neither was in sight of any power-play duty.

Instead, it was MacKenzie Weegar quarterbacking PP1 and Rasmus Andersson quarterbacking PP2. I asked Ryan Huska what the theory was and he explained that the team's power play, which struggled most of last year, was finding its stride toward the end and that was with Weegar and Andersson.

So they deserve the first chance at holding onto those positions; Bean and Barrie represent options down the road, if the units tweak — or, presumably, if there's an injury along the way. For most of last year, the power play was in the hands of Marc Savard — and that hire, which looked so good on paper, didn't work out at all. So Savard left — he joined Craig Berube on Toronto's staff — and so we'll see how that goes. Savard had success with Berube in St. Louis and Toronto has the pieces on the PP to be good. How it translates onto the ice will be telling. Getting shut out for the first time in forever during the opener versus Montreal wasn't the start the Leafs wanted, though Canadiens goalie Sam Montembeault can take a lot of the credit.

Goalie signing frenzy

Ever since Jeremy Swayman signed that eight-year, \$66 million contract with the Bruins, there's been a rush by teams to get goalies signed. Minnesota quietly got future starter Jesper Wallstedt signed for two years, with a \$2.2 million AAV on a one-way deal that starts next year in the post-Fleury era. Wallstedt made the Wild's opening-day roster, but he can still be sent to the minors for playing time this year, where he'll earn just \$80,000 on his current two-way deal. Seattle, meanwhile, gave Joey Daccord a five-year, \$25 million extension that begins next season, signaling their belief he can be their 1A or 1B going forward.

But the most interesting deal was how Swayman's former partner in Boston, Linus Ullmark, got the identical dollar amount from the Senators to sign in Ottawa — \$8.25 million. The term was four years, which is a reasonable compromise given Ullmark is 31, relatively young for a goalie, so this contract carries him through to the end of the 2028-29 season.

Presumably, the Senators didn't think they could risk letting Ullmark get to market next July if he had a credible season on their behalf.

But if you take one step backward to look at the big picture, think about this, given where the goalie market appears to be heading. The New Jersey Devils managed to get Calgary to retain salary on Jacob Markström for the next two years — his AAV is a modest \$4.125 million — when they acquired him this summer. That looks increasingly like a tidy bit of business. Factoring in the \$1.925 million they are paying Jake Allen, the Devils' total goalie bill this year will come in at just over \$6 million — modest dollars for the experience levels they're getting.

The Athletic / The 2024-25 NHL All-Intrigue roster: One name from each team to watch this season

By Sean McIndoe- October 11, 2024

The NHL season has started. Are you intrigued?

Probably not, because that's a weird word that only ever gets broken out for gimmicks like this, but whatever. Let's mark the new year with my annual list of names around the league that I'm especially interested in tracking over the coming season.

We're looking for 12 forwards, six defensemen and two goalies, plus a coach and a GM. One name per team, with enough honorable mentions to get every team a mention. And just to make things a little tougher and spread the intrigue around, nobody from last year's list is allowed to repeat.

Like all great teams, we'll build from the net out. Last year's list started with an American goalie with a new contract who ended up winning the Vezina. Can we make it two years in a row?

Goalies

Jeremy Swayman, Bruins

Our first goaltending spot is a fairly easy call, as Swayman rejoins the Bruins after a legitimately nasty contract negotiation. All's well that ends well, and the general consensus seems to be that the two sides arrived at a fair number. But after missing just about all of camp and then watching his backup get shelled in the opener, Swayman and his new deal will be under a microscope, especially early on.

Jacob Markstrom, Devils

The trade to the Devils finally happened, although it took longer than we thought it would. After last season's write-off, the Devils are expected to be right back in contention now that they've presumably solved their goaltending issues. It's not always that simple with goalies, of course, especially when we're talking about 34-year-olds on new teams. But it will work in New Jersey, because it pretty much has to.

Honorable mentions: While the Darcy Kuemper acquisition initially felt more like the salary dump the Kings had to accept to get away from Pierre-Luc Dubois, he heads into the season as the starter facing a make-or-break year.

Defensemen

Evan Bouchard, Oilers

There's plenty of star power in Edmonton, but most of it is a known quantity. Leon Draisaitl has his contract and Connor McDavid will win whichever awards he's decided to win this year, and Zach Hyman has shown us a surprisingly high ceiling. But for my money, Bouchard is the most interesting story on the team, because we're not sure how good he can be. First-pair stud? Norris contender? Norris winner? It all feels in play. Then again, he's only 24 and didn't really explode until last year, so maybe we've already seen the ceiling. Oh, and the Oilers had better figure it out quickly, because he needs an extension.

Moritz Seider, Red Wings

Another player with a big new contract to live up to, Seider comes with an additional helping of debate over just how good he really is. After debuting with a Calder Trophy win, Seider seemed like he was on track to join fellow young blueliners like Cale Makar, Adam Fox, Quinn Hughes and Rasmus Dahlin in the

annual Norris race. It hasn't happened yet, but he's only 23 years old. He's still got time to prove he's that guy. Only now, he's got the contract too.

Gustav Forsling, Panthers

Every few years, there's a defenseman who goes from "oh yeah, that guy" to "dark horse Norris candidate" seemingly overnight, as it feels like the entire hockey world catches up to what he can do at the same time. Past candidates include Anton Stralman and MacKenzie Weegar, so it's possible this is a state of Florida thing, but last year it was Forsling who emerged as the stud you wish your team had found. Not bad for a waiver pickup, but I want to see where the story goes now.

And since we just mentioned him ...

MacKenzie Weegar, Flames

Remember that softball episode of "The Simpsons" where all the All-Star players are removed one by one, but then you remember that Darryl Strawberry is still there? Despite their sell-off, the Flames still have a handful of Strawberrys left on the roster, including Nazem Kadri and Jonathan Huberdeau. But there's also Weegar, a guy who's seen his profile drop since arriving in Calgary despite solid production. Did you know he was one of only four defensemen to score 20 goals last year, along with Makar, Dahlin and Roman Josi? That's not bad company, and it makes you wonder if a market could ever develop for the 30-year-old despite the six years left on his deal.

Mikhail Sergachev, Utah

Remember that weird time in between Utah getting a team and the draft, when it seemed like they had a ton of cap space and picks to move and were rumored to be in on every big name in the league? In the end, they turned all that into Sergachev and not a whole lot else. And it might have been the right move, since wild spending sprees rarely work out well in this league. Still, it will be interesting to see how Sergachev does as a team's top guy after years of apprenticing under Victor Hedman. Remember, despite having seven full seasons and two Cup wins under his belt, he's still just 26.

Lane Hutson, Canadiens

I think Habs fans are excited for this kid, although you probably haven't picked up on it because they're being very subtle about it. OK, Montreal, we get it — the blue line of the future will be excellent, and Hutson will get the chance to be the first of the batch to hit stardom. It could absolutely happen, and if he can stick around all year then maybe a Calder run isn't even out of the question. Then again, the list of defensemen who've starred in this league at Hutson's size isn't a long one, so there are no guarantees. He sure looked good in the preseason, though.

Honorable mentions: I've already floated the idea of Thomas Harley as a long-shot Norris candidate, which would not be the most ridiculous prediction involving a Stars blueliner that I ever got right. The whole Calder campaign didn't quite get over the finish line, but Brock Faber has a new contract and some big expectations to live up to in Year 2 for the Wild. And with Jakob Chychrun gone and Thomas Chabot solidly into the middle-pair phase of his career, the path is clear for Jake Sanderson to ascend to stud status in Ottawa.

Forwards

Alexander Ovechkin, Capitals

No need to get cute with our Washington pick, as Ovechkin heads into the season with a shot at history. He's 42 goals away from breaking Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals mark, a record that fans like me grew

up thinking was completely unreachable. Expect constant updates about Ovechkin's pace and when/if he projects to claim the crown.

Matvei Michkov, Flyers

Michkov comes into the league with as much or more hype than any Flyers prospect since Eric Lindros. No pressure, kid. And while Flyers fans will be watching him closely, so will fans of the six teams that passed on him in last year's draft, in part because he was supposed to be a tough sign. One year later, here he is. Let's see if he's ready.

Jake Guentzel, Lightning

Steven Stamkos, Predators

Yeah, that still looks weird. It's too simplistic to say the Lightning simply chose Guentzel over longtime captain Stamkos. But it's also not completely inaccurate, which is going to make this into a season-long referendum on Julien BriseBois and the wisdom of making tough choices. Should we declare a definite winner just based on which guy has the most goals at any given moment? No, but we will anyway.

Nikolaj Ehlers, Jets

Wasn't he getting traded? We all thought so, but maybe Kevin Cheveldayoff missed the memo. With just one year left until he hits the UFA market, that leaves Ehlers as one of the biggest stars heading into a contract year. Whether that also makes him a deadline target will depend on how the Jets' season is going, but a quick start by the 28-year-old winger would make things interesting.

Mitch Marner, Maple Leafs

Another pending UFA, and one that's hardly a surprise to see on this list. After another wasted postseason, Leafs management seemed set to finally break up the core, with Marner the obvious choice to move. The fan base was even largely (though not unanimously) behind it. Then ... nothing happened. No trade, but also no extension, and now even his biggest critics seem to be back on board and engraving his name on the Art Ross Trophy. So apparently, we're just back to business as usual — which in Toronto, means everything Marner does (and doesn't do) will be micro-analyzed until you're completely sick of it. And then for 81 more games after that.

Vincent Trocheck, Rangers

The Igor Shesterkin contract watch remains the biggest story in New York, but that will mostly play out off of the ice. Instead, I'm using my pick on Trocheck, the 11-year veteran who had a sneaky elite-level season last year. If he can repeat that, or even take another step forward, the Rangers' top six is in great shape. If he regresses, a quiet offseason might start to look like a mistake for a contending team whose four top-scoring forwards are all north of 30.

Tomas Hertl, Golden Knights

The trade that sent him to Vegas at least year's deadline — the rare blockbuster that seems to come out of nowhere — was all sorts of fun. Surprises are cool, we all got to make jokes about the salary cap not applying to the Golden Knights, and a good time was had by all. But then Hertl had just three goals and five points in 13 games (regular season and playoffs combined), including just one point in the Knights' first-round exit. He was coming back from surgery, but you'd sure like to see some early production from a healthy Hertl to soothe any nerves about a contract that runs through 2030.

Shane Wright, Kraken

I've always been low-key fascinated by the No. 4 pick in the 2022 draft. Maybe it's because I was in the building that night to see the massive reaction from Montreal fans when the Canadiens went with Juraj Slafkovský instead, and Wright's subsequent stare-down in their direction. Two years in, it seems like the Habs made the right call, with Wright failing to do much at the NHL level so far. But Harman makes the case that he could be primed for a breakout this year, so let's see where this goes.

Trevor Zegras, Ducks

At this point, I have to admit I have no idea what to expect from Zegras in the short, medium or long term. I thought he was a top-tier prospect and future face of the Ducks franchise. Management doesn't seem sold on at least one of those, and maybe both, given how often we've heard his name in trade rumors. But he's still there, still penciled into a top-six role, and still might be the team's most recognizable name. Is he still good? Was he ever? Are we destined to do this forever, until he retires in 2043 as the team's all-time leading scorer while rumors swirl that he'll be dealt any day now?

Mathew Barzal, Islanders

He still hasn't reached the 85-point mark he set as a rookie way back in 2017-18, but he came close with last year's 80, his first time topping 62 since that first campaign. So is he the franchise-level superstar he looked like as a rookie, or the middling (and maybe overpaid) borderline first-liner he's occasionally looked like since? It's probably somewhere in the middle, but how much the needle swings this year will tell us a lot.

J.T. Miller, Canucks

Two years ago, Miller signed a \$56 million extension that we were calling a bad contract before it had even kicked in. Now he's coming off a 103-point season that's making that kind of criticism look foolish ... maybe. He's certainly worth every penny right now, but he turns 32 during the season and has six years left, so any sign of a slowdown this year would be bad news for Vancouver. Or, you know, maybe the contract criticism was just foolish.

Honorable mentions: I can't use Connor Bedard again because he was last year's pick, so let's mention Chicago's Taylor Hall, a former MVP coming off a lost season and trying to get his career back on track. Speaking of No. 1 picks, they're pretty much mandatory for this kind of column, so Macklin Celebrini is the obvious call for the Sharks. Casey Mittelstadt looked good in the playoffs for the Avalanche, so let's see what he can do in his first full season as their second-line center. And in Pittsburgh, Drew O'Connor hasn't earned a ton of attention through parts of four NHL seasons, but he may get a chance on Sidney Crosby's line and a chance to be this year's Mark Donk.

Coach and GM

Lindy Ruff, Sabres

It's not often you see a guy return to the team that hired him 27 years ago, but here we are. The question is whether Ruff was the best man for the job or just a predictably popular choice by an overwhelmed GM trying to buy himself more time with a frustrated fan base. Ruff worked some magic with the Devils two years ago, and the Sabres would love to see even a fraction of that repeat in Buffalo. But nostalgia wears off quickly, and the season is already off to a shaky start.

Doug Armstrong, Blues

It's been a while since we've seen a GM coming off a summer with multiple offer sheets. I'm not sure we've ever seen a GM enter a season knowing he has exactly two years left before his publicly announced replacement takes over. Armstrong was already one of the better GMs in the league. What

will he do now that he's plausibly in his "gray hair, don't care" era? Probably miss the playoffs with a middling roster, but time will tell.

Honorable mentions: He would appear to have an almost impossible job ahead of him in Columbus, but if he can harness the early season emotion I could see Dean Evason as a long-shot Jack Adams pick. And it should be interesting to watch Eric Tulsky and friends get to work in the Carolina front office, and significantly less interesting to see every one of their moves turned into a referendum on analytics or the computer boys or whatever we can stoke out of the fading embers of that whole battle.

[The Athletic / What we're hearing about 4 veteran UFA defensemen looking for another shot: Johnston and LeBrun](#)

By Chris Johnston and Pierre LeBrun- October 11, 2024

With the NHL regular season off and running, there are still a number of veteran defensemen who hope the game hasn't completely passed them by.

Mark Giordano, John Klingberg, Justin Schultz and Kevin Shattenkirk are among the free agents currently without a contract who still hope to find their way back to an NHL roster during the 2024-25 campaign.

They account for 3,754 combined games played at the NHL level — plus multiple Stanley Cup championships, a Norris Trophy and numerous other accolades.

There are no restrictions on where and when they can sign. They need only find someone to offer a contract.

With that in mind, here's what we're hearing about each player's situation while they wait for the phone to ring.

Mark Giordano

The oldest player in the NHL last season still has designs on squeezing in one more year at age 41.

Giordano spent the summer skating with Toronto-based NHLers and has continued to train since they dispersed for training camp. He's pushed himself particularly hard in on-ice sessions while trying to fend off Father Time and work his way back to a league where 39-year-old Ryan Suter of the St. Louis Blues is currently slated to be the oldest skater.

Giordano has already enjoyed a 1,148-game NHL career but continues to chase an elusive Stanley Cup — making it a priority for him to try to land a depth job with one of the teams in contender mode.

The Edmonton Oilers, Winnipeg Jets, Carolina Hurricanes and New York Rangers are among those seen as appealing possibilities.

The 2019 Norris Trophy winner suited up for 46 games with the Toronto Maple Leafs last season but was scratched for the entirety of a seven-game playoff series against the Boston Bruins. Still, he's remained reliable well beyond an age where most can even play in the NHL, and he's posted a plus rating at five-on-five in five of the past six seasons.

On top of that, he's been a valued locker-room voice who previously served as a captain for the Calgary Flames and Seattle Kraken.

John Klingberg

Now nine months since Klingberg underwent a double hip resurfacing procedure, the 32-year-old is deep into the rehabilitation work he hopes will allow him to resume his NHL career later this season.

Klingberg's procedure was performed by Dr. Edwin Su at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York — the same surgeon who operated on Patrick Kane's right hip in 2023. Those two players have been in contact during Klingberg's recovery period.

Of particular note when it comes to the Swede's file is that he previously came back from a double hip surgery in April 2015 — before he established himself as one of the NHL's better puck-distributing power-play specialists. His past two NHL seasons were hampered by hip discomfort, with Klingberg limited to

just 14 games last season with the Toronto Maple Leafs before he was forced to shut things down and go for surgery in January 2024.

The right-shot defenseman is skating in the Greater Toronto Area as part of an extensive rehab program. While there is no firm timetable on when he's expected to be ready for NHL action, there is hope his health will allow it at some point in the new year.

Klingberg is eligible to sign a performance bonus-laden one-year contract that reduces the risk being taken by an interested team because he's a veteran of more than 400 NHL games who spent more than 100 days on injured reserve last season.

Justin Schultz

This is a unique situation because the 34-year-old is coming off a season where he held down a regular spot in the Seattle Kraken's lineup and he's already passed on other NHL opportunities over the summer, according to league sources.

Schultz still feels like he has something to give. He's just waiting for the right situation and fit.

The right-shot defenseman has quietly enjoyed a career that would make Forrest Gump jealous. How many other players can say they've been teammates with Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Alex Ovechkin?

Schultz also owns two Stanley Cup rings, has played in multiple desirable cities and has more than 800 NHL games on his resume over 12 years. It's been an incredible run for a guy who was once a heavily in-demand NCAA free agent when he left the University of Wisconsin in 2012.

Don't rule out the possibility Schultz ends up going to Europe for a different experience if the right NHL opportunity doesn't emerge.

Kevin Shattenkirk

It's been somewhat surprising Shattenkirk hasn't found the right fit after serving as a dependable option for the Bruins last season.

The 35-year-old unrestricted free agent, with 952 NHL games under his belt, averaged nearly 16 minutes per night for Boston and dressed for six Bruins playoff games in the spring.

His camp, led by agent Jordan Neumann, remains in constant communication with several teams, having in-depth conversations about his client's potential fit. It's believed the Edmonton Oilers are among the teams that have talked to them.

Shattenkirk's camp is patiently waiting for the right fit while the former Team USA Olympian works out daily in Connecticut with hockey trainer Ben Prentiss.

He's been known as a high-character player in every dressing room he's called home and won a Stanley Cup with the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2020.

The Athletic / Ex-Wild coach Dean Evason returns to Minnesota, ready to move on and embrace his new challenge

By Michael Russo- October 11, 2024

Dean Evason, in Prague in May as an assistant coach with Team Canada at the World Championship, had just gotten done with dinner and was strolling around Old Town Square with his wife, three kids and mom when Evason's son, Bryce, pointed: "Dad, there's Billy."

Evason hadn't seen Bill Guerin since November, when the Minnesota Wild general manager called him into his office and fired him as coach. Yet there Guerin was, sitting on a patio with Mike Sullivan, the Penguins' coach and the man Guerin has picked to coach the United States in the 2025 4 Nations Face-Off and 2026 Winter Olympics.

What are the chances? As Evason crept up, he overheard Guerin explaining to Sullivan why he let Evason go.

As loud as can be, Evason surprised Guerin by yelling, "Well, if you didn't fire your f—ing coach, you probably would have made the playoffs!"

Guerin, hysterically laughing, stood up and gave Evason a bear hug, then came out to the street to say hello to Evason's family.

Evason's mom, at first, was standoffish. Guerin asked Sheila for a hug. Sarcastically, she said, "Just this one time," before punching Guerin, let's just say, way, way ... way down low.

Wild fans who watched Evason for six seasons — parts of five as head coach — now know who Evason gets his fire from.

Columbus Blue Jackets fans, a loyal bunch who keep filling up Nationwide Arena despite years of losing, will learn the same soon.

Evason's .639 points percentage in Minnesota is the best of the seven coaches in franchise history. On Thursday night, in — of all places — Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Evason's tenure as Blue Jackets coach will officially begin.

"When coaches go back to play a team after they get fired and they say that it means nothing to them, that makes absolutely no sense," Evason said during a phone conversation with The Athletic. "Now, I don't want to win that hockey game any more or any less than I want to win the sixth game of the season. But is there more emotion? Is there more excitement? Is there more passion because you were in that spot and you got let go from there?"

"I mean, of course there is."

To show you how much respect Guerin has for Evason, he persistently pumped Evason's tires when Don Waddell, the longtime Thrashers and Hurricanes GM in his first year in Columbus, was going through the hiring process.

"We know we all have shelf lives. Coaches' are probably shorter than GMs'," Waddell told The Athletic. "Billy's a friend of mine and I don't think Billy's going to steer me wrong. Billy felt bad about firing Dean, but he felt he had to make the move at that time."

Guerin laughed at the fact Evason's first game with Columbus is in Minnesota.

“It’s right up Deano’s alley,” Guerin said. “Trust me, I want to beat him, too. He’s beaten me in more rounds of golf than I care to share, so I want to take him down.

“Hey, look, I know in the days leading up to firing Dean, I kept saying he was safe. I guess I just never really admitted it to myself that it was in the back of my head. Unfortunately, this happens all the time where players kind of are out of answers. And it’s not the coach’s fault. It’s not the players’ fault. It’s usually just time.

“But it’s the most difficult decision I’ve had to make. Dean’s a friend, and he’s a hell of a coach, and he had a big hand in really changing things for the positive around here. I think he’s perfect for a young team like Columbus. From the outside looking in, I think his messaging is perfect for that. The team takes on the personality of the coach, and that’s a really good thing for Columbus.”

If ever a team needed a steady hand, it’s this one.

It was the early evening on Aug. 29 when Evason found out Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau had been killed along with his brother, Matthew, in New Jersey.

Evason, in Colorado for a concert at Red Rocks, was in a hotel room watching TV with one of his daughters when Waddell called.

“He said Johnny got in an accident,” Evason said. “I said, ‘He’ll be OK, right?’ And Donnie said, ‘No.’”

Evason, shocked, almost dropped the phone. His eyes welled up in the moment, as he thought back to sitting down with the always-happy, always-smiling, always-full-of-life Gaudreau just a few weeks earlier.

After being hired, as Evason began the process of calling his new players, there was one he wanted to meet with face to face: Johnny Hockey.

Evason called Gaudreau and said, “I’d like to fly to Philadelphia and have lunch with you.”

Gaudreau loved the idea.

Every morning at 10 a.m., Gaudreau would skate with his dad, Guy, at a rink in New Jersey. Gaudreau gave Evason a date, a time and the name of a restaurant they could meet at near the rink.

Evason was to fly in, then fly out later in the day.

“It was supposed to be a lunch and a quick chat,” Evason said. “And we ended up sitting there for two hours, talking about the team, about him, his family. We talked about everything, just getting a feel of who he was, who I am. I left there and had a fantastic feeling about moving forward with him as our star player.”

“And that,” Evason said, his voice breaking, “is the only time I spoke to him.”

Gaudreau’s influence is actually one of the reasons Evason landed the Columbus job in the first place.

When Waddell was hired in Columbus and began going through the process of talking to players to diagnose what had plagued the Blue Jackets, he talked with several of the veterans, from Gaudreau and captain Boone Jenner to Erik Gudbranson and Zach Werenski.

They wanted a coach who would hold them accountable. A coach who would push them and be hard on them but also be fair.

One thing Gaudreau told Waddell stuck in his head.

“I asked Johnny who he thought his best coaches were, and he really spoke highly of Darryl Sutter and Bob Hartley, who obviously coached for me in Atlanta, and I know both guys are pretty hard coaches,”

Waddell said. "I asked all the older players who played for multiple coaches the same question, and they all liked that type of coaching style.

"Johnny talked about what we needed to move forward, and being in that locker room every night, the pieces that we needed or were missing and what kind of atmosphere we wanted to try to create. Dean checked every box of what Johnny and the older guys wanted."

Evason, a former NHLer, has coached since the late 90s. He has experienced it all, but there's no guidebook on how to navigate the start of a season after the loss of a player, especially one as beloved as Gaudreau.

After the brothers died, the Blue Jackets held a vigil. At that point, Evason hadn't even met three-quarters of his players in person. As he subsequently flew with the team for the brothers' funeral, Evason couldn't stop thinking about Gaudreau and how unfair this was.

He felt so terribly for their family, for their friends.

"I'll never forget how eerily quiet it was throughout the entire day," Evason said. "Just beyond emotional."

But two days later, when the Blue Jackets were back in Columbus, Waddell asked Jenner if they should postpone captain's skates.

"Boone, who I'm telling you reminds me so much of (Wild captain) Jared Spurgeon the way he treats young players and his teammates, said, 'No,'" Evason said. "Boone said, 'It's important we're all together at this time.' So those first couple of skates, it was therapy in some way that they were able to go out there and do what they do.

"There is still a ton of emotion. Like the other day, I talked to a guy off to the side just passing in the room, and there were tears all over the place. It's very hard. But the guys have stuck together. There's an incredible closeness with this group."

The player Evason thinks about the most is Sean Monahan, one of Gaudreau's best friends who signed a five-year deal with the Blue Jackets this offseason. Their plan was to raise their kids together. Monahan is a quiet guy, but Evason said teammates are making sure he's well-supported.

"His backyard looks onto Boone Jenner's backyard, and it's a couple of doors down from Johnny and (his wife) Meredith's home," Evason said. "They have been able to support each other closely."

Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey hangs in a stall next to Monahan's in the home locker room at Nationwide Arena.

"And when we go on the road, his jersey will be in the stall exactly where Johnny would be on the road," Evason said. "That stall will always stay his and open and with his jersey on game days."

Evason wouldn't describe his offseason as frustrating.

"Disappointing, I would call it," he said.

There were several head coach vacancies. He interviewed for many, and even though he seemed tailor-made for teams like the Ottawa Senators, Winnipeg Jets and Seattle Kraken, he didn't get offered any.

He was offered three assistant or associate jobs, but at this point in his coaching career, he was not ready to go back to that role.

He decided to bet on himself, be patient and wait for another head-coaching gig, this season or beyond.

He was enjoying the time off anyway. His wife, Genevieve, is a flight attendant with Air Canada, and since being let go, he had accompanied her to five or six countries for 24-to-48-hour trips and took a couple more vacations together.

A golf nut, he went to the Masters because for the first time he was unemployed in April. He went to Hilton Head and Phoenix for golf trips with buddies. A lover of theater, he took in some Broadway shows. A sports nut, he went to a Yankees game and the U.S. Open tennis tournament. He visited all three of his kids.

But after Evason turned down the assistant gigs, Waddell left Carolina for Columbus, ultimately fired Pascal Vincent, and suddenly another job was open.

Waddell made clear the one prerequisite was previous head-coaching experience. He talked with several candidates, including Jay Woodcroft, Todd McLellan and Jeff Blashill.

“Every time I talked to Dean, the clear thing that came out was not just the passion to coach, but the passion to coach the Blue Jackets,” Waddell said. “Finally in July, when I brought him in here and he met with the senior people with me making the decision, he was clear-cut the No. 1 choice by everybody once we finished our interview process.”

Waddell began doing due diligence with former Blue Jackets captain and current director of hockey operations Rick Nash, and Nash called a bunch of players who previously played for Evason. One by one Nash got endorsements. Nash was also Team Canada’s GM at the World Championship, so Nash got a real good feel for Evason as a person and as a coach.

Evason was offered the job in late July and jumped at it.

Like the Wild, this is the Blue Jackets’ 24th season. They have made the playoffs only six times, getting past the first round just once.

Excluding the expansion Vegas Golden Knights and Seattle Kraken, the Blue Jackets have the fewest wins (767) and points (1,754) in the league since their 2000 inception and the worst points percentage (.483).

So this won’t be a quick fix, and the Blue Jackets have already suffered more adversity with a serious injury to Jenner in a recent practice.

“Dean and I talked just yesterday about, ‘Nobody’s going to feel sorry for us,’” Waddell said. “We’re not going to make excuses. We’ll go out and play hard every night. Whether we win or lose, every night we’ve got to make sure we play hard and have the team prepared to play the way he wants to play. And he won’t forget that and I won’t forget that.”

Evason likes his team.

Everybody talks about the young players like Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger, Kirill Marchenko, Yegor Chinakhov and David Jiříček, but Evason thinks highly of the Blue Jackets’ depth, their goaltending and veterans like Werenski, Gudbranson, Sean Kuraly and Monahan.

“Our team is fast, but I think we’ve got a lot of bite with our group as well,” Evason said. “It’s been such a cluster here for the last two, three years with not having a coach, having a coach, having different coaches, managers. So we just need some stability put into place.

“And I think between Don’s group upstairs and a tremendous coaching staff, we’ve got some stability and I think the players like that.”

Evason’s loving living in Columbus, too.

Like St. Paul, where he lived in a condo and walked to and from the arena daily, he bought a condo a few blocks from Nationwide Arena. And one of the perks of the job is membership at nearby Double Eagle Golf Club.

During a recent golf outing with his assistants, including former Wild goalie Niklas Bäckström, Evason was 250 yards from the green and debating whether to lay up. He decided to, then walked toward the ball and ripped himself audibly for not having more courage.

“Backy walks by and goes, ‘Let me guess. We’re going to play two defensemen in overtime, too,’” Evason said, howling.

The Wild have had six 100-point seasons. Two came consecutively with Evason at the helm, and that was amidst the Wild having to spend significantly less than 31 other teams during the first two years of the Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyout penalties.

“I do feel a lot of pride because what we did there, as far as getting to the playoffs every year,” Evason said. “But you know what we did? We competed every night. We gave ourselves an opportunity every night.

“Yeah, we didn’t have playoff success. We lost in the first round every year, but we competed our butts off. If you played against the Minnesota Wild, you knew that you were in for a hard, physical, tough game.

“You can talk about the cap and whatever, but the players that were there bought into playing hard for each other.”

Evason’s mom and wife will be in Minnesota for his Blue Jackets debut Thursday.

Evason is excited to walk into Xcel Energy Center again.

“I can’t wait to take it all in,” he said. “I absolutely loved my time in Minnesota, and I loved living in Saint Paul, and I loved walking into that building. It’s your home, right? You make it your home.

“It’s the same thing here. I walk to work. I come in a certain way. I walk in. I see the same people. I’m looking forward to seeing the same people walking in there and not taking that right turn into the Wild locker room but continuing down the hall to our locker room. I’m looking forward to embracing all the emotions that are going to come with it, and hopefully the outcome is on the right side of the win-loss column for the Columbus Blue Jackets.”

The Athletic / Do NHL players support a shorter preseason and longer regular season? Yes, but with conditions

By Jeremy Rutherford- October 11, 2024

The NHL's 2024-25 regular season is now underway, and the debate of whether the league plays too many preseason games has likely become an afterthought already.

With opening-night extravaganzas taking place in Florida, where the Panthers are still relishing their Stanley Cup, and Utah, where the relocated hockey club is getting comfortable in its new surroundings, most have moved on.

But that doesn't mean the conversation is going away.

As The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun reported recently, the NHL and NHL Players' Association have had preliminary discussions about potential changes to the schedule, and among the possibilities is trimming the number of preseason games to four and having an 84-game regular season.

The current collective bargaining agreement expires in September 2026, and the topic is expected to be brought up when the two sides have more dialogue. In the meantime, the NHLPA will continue to canvass its players for input.

To see what those opinions might be, The Athletic asked more than a dozen NHL players and two head coaches for their thoughts on the issues.

They touched on all the key points:

In this year's preseason games, Los Angeles Kings defenseman Drew Doughty (broken ankle) and Montreal Canadiens forward Patrik Laine (knee sprain) were both injured during exhibition games for their respective teams and are expected to miss months of the regular season.

"There's been a lot of big-time names that have gotten injured," Anaheim Ducks forward Alex Killorn said. "Guys that sell tickets. Those are guys you don't want to see get hurt."

"When you see this year how many players are getting injured, you have to think about it," Minnesota Wild forward Marco Rossi said. "To me, it makes sense to add regular season games and only have three, four preseason games."

But even Rossi's teammate, Wild defenseman Brock Faber, wondered if that would matter when it came to injuries.

"I think people talk about the star players getting hurt in preseason, but it's going to happen at the start of the season if you're playing less," Faber said. "Like you need to play games. Your risk of injury will go down once you start to play more and more and more. (If not), then Game No. 1 out of training camp, your whole team's basically playing Game No. 2, which makes it more dangerous."

As players have been saying for years, however, few of them arrive at camp still needing to get into game shape.

"I felt like preseason games have become more like regular-season games in terms of intensity, physical play, than it has in the past," Pittsburgh Penguins forward Rickard Rakell said. "It definitely feels like everything is more competitive from the start."

They come ready to play, so it's more about cleaning up any bad habits from summer shinny or finding chemistry with a new teammate.

"I just feel like the preseason is to, for me, get ready for the regular season — sharpen your touches, fine-tune your edges, get the rhythm and the reps," Penguins forward Lars Eller added. "I don't personally need more than one or two games for that. To play three or four is just not necessary."

That's what most of the veterans who were surveyed said, which is why they feel six or eight preseason games are unnecessary.

"That's a bit much," St. Louis Blues forward Brandon Saad said. "I think every guy that I've talked to only needs two or three to feel ready. But I understand how they want to see other guys and give guys a chance.

"Back when I was in Chicago, I played a majority of the preseason games. I'm sure they wanted to see me in those situations, so that benefited me. So I see why it's there, but at the same time, I don't really think that many are necessary."

A few lockers down from Saad was one of those prospects who could benefit from more preseason games.

"You have a lot of guys at camp, so those games are important," Blues forward prospect Zach Dean said. "If there's only three preseason games, the vets are going to want to get at least two games in before the start of the season, and it's going to be tough to get the young guys in."

There could be a way around that issue, though the solution wouldn't be actual NHL games for those prospects.

"I think if they decrease the number of (preseason) games and you feel rookies aren't getting a chance to make an impression, you should increase the rookie camp right before main camp instead," Wild goalie Filip Gustavsson said. "Then you know who could actually take a spot and just bring those players in. Then you don't need as many games."

But it's not just the prospects who are hoping for some ice time in camp.

"When you look at it from the aspect of being a bubble player, four is probably not enough games in the preseason," Penguins forward Cody Glass said. "You want as many opportunities as you can to prove yourself. That's where it's tough, right? It's a hard question."

There are plenty of players who have been in that spot.

"If you asked me 10 years ago when I was trying to make the lineup, I'd probably say I want 20 preseason games to try to make the team," Wild forward Ryan Hartman said. "So there's two sides the way you can look at it. For the vets, we probably don't want it. For the kids, they do."

If there's a shorter preseason, the chatter around the league is that there could be two more regular-season games for an 84-game schedule.

"I mean, regular season games are meaningful, right?" Winnipeg Jets forward Cole Perfetti said. "In the regular season, everyone's so excited for that. Everyone's itching for the regular season, so I think everyone would really enjoy that. We're here anyways. Why not play?"

It's one thing, though, when you're 22 years old like Perfetti and another thing when you're 39 and have played the fourth-most games of any goaltender in NHL history.

"I could jump into a longer regular season, but I feel if you asked in mid-February, you could feel a little different," Wild goalie Marc-André Fleury said.

Other vets don't mind the idea, but wonder if 84 games is really the right answer.

“You go back and forth,” Saad said. “It’s nice to have a lot of games, but at the same time, if you played 70 games, and they’re more intense, that might be better for hockey, too. It’s a long enough season as it is, and the more you add, the harder it is on players. I don’t think we need more hockey games necessarily.”

Necessary? Perhaps not. But if it brought in more revenue?

“In terms of 84 games, I would have to see how that would affect the bottom line — if guys are going to end up getting paid more,” Killorn said. “I know the owners take a lot of the money in the preseason. If we’re going to play those games anyways, might as well get paid for them. It’s all a calculation. It’s all based on revenue. If we did play those two games, we would have higher revenues. How that would affect contracts? I don’t know. I just don’t want to get into a situation where it’s, ‘OK, 84. What about 86?’ That’s where I get a little worried.”

That, of course, would be what drives any decision.

“I do think a lot of it comes from the financial side of the game,” Jets defenseman Josh Morrissey said. “If two extra regular-season games contribute to that, that will probably be the decision that people a lot smarter than I make.”

Even if the NHL and NHLPA decide not to shorten the preseason, or extend the regular season, coaches and players alike hope there are other differences in the exhibition schedule.

“I think the biggest challenge is we put these guys in games three days into training camp in some instances,” Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. “I mean, how could a team possibly pull itself together and play a game three days into training camp? Yet, that’s what we do. I’m not sure that makes a lot of sense.”

Another coach agreed.

“I still (think) we need the length of training camp,” Blues coach Drew Bannister said. “But I think there’s ways around that, having more scrimmages in practices early on compared to jumping in games. I think there’s a happy medium there that would be good for both the players and also the coaching staff where we’re able to get enough done and make decisions.”

And when teams do begin their preseason schedule, the prevailing sentiment is that the lineups should look more similar.

Currently, the NHL requires clubs to suit up a minimum of eight veterans, which is defined as skaters who have played 30 NHL games the previous season, goalies who’ve dressed in 50 games or played in 30 the previous year, any player who has played in 100-plus games, or a current-year first-round pick.

“I don’t think it’s really fair for the young guys not to be able to show themselves, so maybe (give them a couple of games) and just play the top guys the last two games of the preseason, where the lineup is a little NHL-like,” Ducks defenseman Radko Gudas said.

Gudas isn’t alone, but for another reason.

“It’s not really appealing to fans in general, too,” Wild forward Marcus Foligno said.

So will there be any changes? Do the players want them? What’s the consensus?

“It’s something that should be talked about for sure,” New York Islanders forward Mathew Barzal said. “I don’t know if there’ll be any action taken on it but I definitely think it’s a conversation we should be having.”

The Athletic / The NHL Contention Cycle: Where does each team stand now and in the future?

By Dom Luszczyszyn and Scott Wheeler- October 11, 2024

The NHL runs on star power.

The best teams are the best teams because they have the best players. Those guys run the show, drive the bus, stir the drink — whatever idiom you want to use.

They're go-to guys because it's more often than not those guys leading teams to championships. Or close to it. That was on full display last summer with a star-studded Stanley Cup Final showdown between the Florida Panthers and Edmonton Oilers.

They're the foundational pieces, team centerpieces, and franchise cornerstones — the ones who form a contending core teams build around.

And if your team doesn't have one, they're the reason there's an entire industry in this league predicated on being as bad as possible just for a small chance to land one.

That thought process is what informs our annual Player Tiers project, an attempt to create a definitive list of hockey's best using the collective judgment of knowledgeable insiders in the game and a modeled projection of each player's value. It's what inspired the debut of the Prospect Tiers, a spinoff that hopes to do the same thing by showing who's up next.

Now, the logical culmination of that: Where does that leave each team standing, now and in the future?

By looking at how each team grades out via both the Player and Prospect Tiers projects, we've created a comprehensive look at how situationally competitive each team is — and where they are in their contention timeline as a result.

If the NHL runs on star power, that run doesn't last forever for each team. Father Time is undefeated which creates the tried and true pattern that this league has operated on for the last two decades: build, rise, contend, fall, rebuild. How long that pattern lasts or takes can often depend on how bright a team's stars can shine and for how long.

This is the Contention Cycle: A deep dive into each team's current place in the league, future trajectory and projected upside over the next five years. All informed simply by our best estimation of each team's present and future star power.

As usual with any overarching look at the league, this isn't the be-all, end-all. There are many other reasons a team can reach the league's upper echelon. The other players on the team matter. The organizational prospect depth matters. The coaches matter. The front office matters. And of course, the salary cap matters.

These placements aren't static either. Far from it. Players and teams can change their perception quickly — it's just a matter of proving and altering trajectories because of it. Essentially, this work isn't set in stone. It's a snapshot of where each team enters the 2024-25 season; something they can change with stronger play, better drafting, surprise breakouts or savvy managing.

All those things matter and are vital to keep in mind. But the main argument to be made despite all that extra nuance is that, above all, it's the stars that are the most important thing to a franchise's championship aspirations. That's fairly clear to see from each team's placement on the chart above.

Based on that, we've separated each team into nine tiers given their place in the contention cycle, and ranked them within.

Here's where they land, now and in the future, why they do, and what their path to sustainable contention is.

You can find the methodology behind Present Rating and Future Rating at the bottom of this post.

Tier

Search

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New Jersey Devils

Window Open

Edmonton Oilers

Window Open

Dallas Stars

Window Open

New York Rangers

Window Open

Colorado Avalanche

Window Open

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Florida Panthers

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Toronto Maple Leafs

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Tampa Bay Lightning

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Vancouver Canucks

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Boston Bruins

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Minnesota Wild

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Win Later

Buffalo Sabres

Win Later
Montreal Canadiens
Win Later
Win Now
Nashville Predators
Win Now
Vegas Golden Knights
Win Now
New York Islanders
Win Now
Winnipeg Jets
Win Now
Limited Ceiling
Carolina Hurricanes
Limited Ceiling
Detroit Red Wings
Limited Ceiling
Ottawa Senators
Limited Ceiling
Rebuilding
Columbus Blue Jackets
Rebuilding
Chicago Blackhawks
Rebuilding
San Jose Sharks
Rebuilding
Anaheim Ducks
Rebuilding
Utah Hockey Club
Rebuilding
Seattle Kraken
Rebuilding
Philadelphia Flyers

Rebuilding

Rebuild Time

Los Angeles Kings

Rebuild Time

Pittsburgh Penguins

Rebuild Time

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St. Louis Blues

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Calgary Flames

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Washington Capitals

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Methodology

Similar to this exercise done two years ago, we compared each player's final placement in the Player Tiers project with his projected value, this time based on Net Rating. That led to the following valuations for each position depending on his tier placement — their "Tier Rating."

Those values were then added up for each team and normalized with percentiles to a scale of 0-to-10 to create their "Present Rating."

To get each team's "Future Rating," we looked at how each player from the Player Tiers is projected to age over the next five seasons and applied that figure to their Tier Rating. We compared that number to the value for each Tier, and put each player in their corresponding future tier.

That process cut off 65 names off this year's top 150.

With that in mind, we did the same exercise with the Prospect Tiers — assigning a Tier Rating to each one based on where they were placed. To get the 122 prospects to fit into the remaining top 150 — and to account for prospect uncertainty — we applied a sliding probability scale to each tier.

That process gave the collection of prospects a combined weight of 65 players and their Tier Ratings were added to the age-adjusted Tier Ratings of the 85 remaining players for each team. That collective value, normalized to percentiles on a scale of 0-to-10, gave us our Future Rating.

Each team's Present Rating and Future Rating were then plotted together (as seen in the introduction), informing their place in the Contention Cycle.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Highlighting every team's oldest player](#)

By Ryan Dixon- October 11, 2024

Sports media mogul Bill Simmons is fond of pointing out there's a distinction between what he dubs "athlete funny" and actually funny.

While exceptions surely exist, that comment rings true.

As for things that are utterly humourless — at least for a section of us — let's introduce the topic of age. As it happens, we must again make a clear distinction between the tiny group of people so physically blessed they're making a living in pro sports — what they lack in jokes they make up for in jacked — and whatever you want to call the rest of us.

There's old, then there's old for an athlete.

Anyone who's seen pictures of men from the 1970s can tell you, from the good news file, turning 40 in the 2020s doesn't look as grim as it used to. By contrast, though, hitting the big 4-0 is starting to mean something very different for NHL hockey players than it did a very short time ago.

For the second time in three years, the opening week in the NHL won't feature a 40-year-old skater. And for the first time in nearly 25 years, we don't have a 40-year-old skater or goalie in action, full stop.

Two years ago, in 2022-23, 41-year-old goalie Craig Anderson was the only 40-plus player suiting up on opening night. Last year, Mark Giordano was the only 40-year-old pulling on a sweater and he'd only hit the milestone birthday about a week before the season began.

Before 2022-23, you've got to go all the way back to 2000-01 to find an opening week with no 40-year-old skaters or goalies. That's when 39-year-olds Igor Larionov and Ray Bourque were a couple months shy of their 40th birthdays at the start of the season.

In 2002, Chris Chelios finished second in Norris Trophy voting at age 40. Eight years later, the guy he lost to — Red Wings teammate Nicklas Lidstrom — straight won the award at 40 years old. The next year, Mark Recchi, at age 43, scored 14 points in 25 gruelling playoff games for the Cup-winning Boston Bruins. At the same age, Jaromir Jagr scored 27 goals and 66 points for the Florida Panthers in 2015-16. Zdeno Chara played 18:44 a night for the New York Islanders in 2021-22 at 44 years young.

And, in 1968-69, some guy called Gordie Howe scored 44 freakin' goals at age 40, a mere 11 seasons before he finally hung 'em up after a 15-goal showing at age 51.

OK, time to stop doing what every old guy is good at — playing "remember when?" — and bring it back to the present.

The oldest guy putting his body on the line this week is Marc-Andre Fleury, who turns 40 about seven weeks into his farewell season on Nov. 28. Ryan Suter, the oldest skater in the league, hits 40 near the end of January.

So, as a fedora tip to Fleury, Suter and all the other active greybeards, for this edition of the Power Rankings, we're going to highlight the most, uh, life-savvy member of each NHL squad.

1. Edmonton Oilers (0-1-0) Last year, Corey Perry proved you're never too old to get better. After having his contract terminated by the Chicago Blackhawks, Perry acknowledged he'd behaved inappropriately and indicated he would seek help for his struggles with alcohol. After a hiatus, he signed with the

Edmonton Oilers and re-upped with the Oil in the off-season. If all goes to plan, Perry and the Oilers will be playing hockey on May 16, 2025, when the 2011 Hart Trophy winner turns 40.

2. Dallas Stars (0-0-0) Let's be real, we'd have a 40-year-old playing on opening night if Joe Pavelski wanted to keep going. It's not like that guy couldn't have tipped home 18 more pucks this year after scoring 27 as a 39-year-old last season. But Pavelski is retired and 35-year-old Jamie Benn is still going in Year Sweet 16 with the Stars. Two other Stars — Evgenii Dadonov and Brendan Smith — are also 35.

3. New Jersey Devils (2-0-0) Is it a bad thing when your goalies are your two oldest guys? Not when they represent a huge upgrade on what you had for most of last year. Maybe Jacob Markstrom (turns 35 in January) and Jake Allen (turned 34 in August) can be the modern-day version of Johnny Bower and Terry Sawchuk, who led the Leafs to the 1967 Cup when Bower was 42 and Sawchuk just a pup at 37.

4. Florida Panthers (1-0-0) What we've learned in the past couple years is, if Sergei Bobrovsky — who just turned 36 — gets his rest, he can still be one of the best.

5. New York Rangers (1-0-0) Most objective observers thought Jonathan Quick was washed at the end of 2022-23 when the Kings moved him at the deadline. But the 38-year-old is still going strong, posting a .911 save percentage last year for the Rangers that represents his best SP since 2017-18.

6. Toronto Maple Leafs (0-1-0) Max Pacioretty, who turns 36 in November, is getting a chance to show he's still got it in Toronto this year. Ryan Reaves, who turns 38 in January, is still playing the role of NHL enforcer.

7. Vegas Golden Knights (1-0-0) It's hard to believe this is already Alex Pietrangelo's fifth year in Vegas. The classy vet is still a vital presence on the blueline at age 34.

8. Colorado Avalanche (0-1-0) Josh Manson turned 33 a couple days ago. Calvin de Haan is also 33, making the two D-men the old men in Denver.

9. Carolina Hurricanes (0-0-0) Brent Burns turns 40 in March and is in the final year of his contract. What the heck, why not go back up to forward for a couple seasons before calling it a career? The big guy could surely do it.

10. Vancouver Canucks (0-0-1) Tyler Myers re-upped in the off-season to play three more years in Vancouver. The big defenceman turns 35 in February.

11. Tampa Bay Lightning (0-0-0) Two of Tampa's most important players are also two of its senior citizens. Defenceman Ryan McDonagh turned 35 in June, while new captain Victor Hedman turns 34 just before Christmas. Two other Bolts — newcomer Cam Atkinson and Luke Glendening — are 35.

12. Boston Bruins (0-1-0) When your most frequent comp is Dennis the Menace, it lends you a certain ageless dynamic. Believe it or not, though, Brad Marchand is 36 years old and in the final year of an eight-year contract.

13. Winnipeg Jets (1-0-0) The Jets have a lot of guys on the wrong side of 30, but nobody who's too far up there yet. Colin Miller is the oldest and he turns 33 just before October ends.

14. Nashville Predators (0-0-0) Gus Nyquist, who just had a career year with 75 points, turned 35 in September. Captain Roman Josi, meanwhile, is now 34 years old.

15. Washington Capitals (0-0-0) We'll surely have a 40-year-old playing at this time next year during the opening week of action. Alex Ovechkin just turned 39 in September and, whether or not he catches Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals record this season, Ovi will be back for more in 12 months on the final year of his contract.

16. Ottawa Senators (0-0-0) Claude Giroux, 37, is already in the final year of the three-year deal he inked to return to his old backyard. Can the Sens finally have the success he envisioned when he returned to Ottawa?
17. Detroit Red Wings (0-0-0) Local boy Jeff Petry turns 38 in December and new goalie Cam Talbot is also 37 right now. Patrick Kane hits 37 in November and it will be fascinating to see how he fares in his first fully healthy season in a couple years.
18. New York Islanders (0-0-0) Semyon Varlamov is a remarkably consistent goalie. Here are the 36-year-old's save percentages with each of the three teams he's played for in the NHL: .915 in 389 games with Colorado, .917 in 163 contests with the Isles and .917 in 59 outings as a Washington Capital.
19. Los Angeles Kings (0-0-0) 37-year-old Trevor Lewis is about nine months older than fellow 1987 baby Anze Kopitar. The injured Drew Doughty will hopefully be back in action ahead of his Dec. 8 birthday, when he turns 35.
20. St. Louis Blues (1-0-0) 39-year-old Ryan Suter inked a one-year deal to skate with the Blues. Will this season be it for the NHL's active games played leader (1,445)?
21. Utah Hockey Club (1-0-0) New D-men Ian Cole and Robert Bortuzzo, at 35 years old, are the elder statesmen in Salt Lake City.
22. Minnesota Wild (0-0-0) Bet the tissue boxes will be out in Steeltown when Marc-Andre Fleury makes his last swing through Pittsburgh as an NHL goalie in a few weeks on Oct. 29.
23. Buffalo Sabres (0-2-0) The only over-30 Sabre is newcomer Jason Zucker and he's still just 32.
24. Seattle Kraken (0-1-0) New captain Jordan Eberle is the senior Kraken at 34 years old. It seems like 10 seconds ago he was scoring massive goals for Team Canada at the World Junior Championship.
25. Philadelphia Flyers (0-0-0) Erik Johnson, the 36-year-old defenceman who was selected first overall in 2006, is a good jumping-off point to the following note: Every No. 1 pick, save one, since 2003 — from Fleury to Macklin Celebrini — is active in the NHL. The lone exception? 2012 top selection Nail Yakupov.
26. Montreal Canadiens (1-0-0) Rugged and right-shooting D-man David Savard, who turns 35 in a couple weeks, is Montreal's oldest player. Will the UFA-to-be still be on the team past the trade deadline?
27. Anaheim Ducks (0-0-0) Until very recently, the oldest guy on the Ducks was 35-year-old Alex Killorn. That changed when Anaheim snagged 36-year-old goalie James Reimer off waivers.
28. Chicago Blackhawks (0-1-0) The Hawks brought in a bunch of vets this summer to try and steady the ship and the oldest among them is 35-year-old Alec Martinez. New captain Nick Foligno turns 37 on Halloween.
29. Calgary Flames (1-0-0) Captain Mikael Backlund is 35 years old and sure looks like he'll be a Flame for life. He's slated to play his 1,000th career game — all with Calgary — on Oct. 30 in Utah.
30. Pittsburgh Penguins (0-1-0) Evgeni Malkin is the oldest of the Big 3 at 38. Sidney Crosby and Kris Letang are right behind at 37. Everybody is under contract through their age-39 season and Letang is signed on through his age-40 campaign.
31. Columbus Blue Jackets (0-0-0) Jack Johnson, now in his second tour with Columbus, is 37 years old.
32. San Jose Sharks (0-0-0) It's probably appropriate that San Jose's old guys — and Sharks legends — Marc-Edouard Vlasic (37) and Logan Couture (35) are both on injured reserve. The oldest guy who'll be skating for San Jose in its opener on Thursday night is 34-year-old defenceman Jan Rutta.

