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January 31, 2025

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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets start trip with Cole Sillinger's OT winner over Vegas Golden Knights

By Brian Hedger – January 31, 2025

Kent Johnson, Zach Werenski and Cole Sillinger came up big for the Blue Jackets in a 2-1 overtime victory over the Vegas Golden Knights late Thursday at T-Mobile Arena.

Defending inside his own blue line during 3-on-3 OT play, Johnson created a breakaway with a great stick check to swipe the puck from Golden Knights perennial all-star defenseman Alex Pietrangelo. His attempt to beat Vegas goalie Ilya Samsonov between the pads was stopped, but Werenski followed with a rebound stuff at the left post that sent the puck to the low slot for Sillinger to clean up while trailing the play.

"Pietrangelo came into the zone and 'KJ' just got a good stick on it and got a breakaway," Sillinger told FanDuel Sports Network's Dave Maetzold on the postgame TV broadcast. "I honestly thought that five-hole move that he likes to do was in, and I just followed it up. (Werenski) was just bashing at it, and I was just the third guy there. The puck was just sitting there and I had the easy job. It was just a good effort from those two."

Sillinger's eighth goal of the season gave the Blue Jackets their second straight victory and second consecutive win in OT after downing the Los Angeles Kings last Saturday in Columbus with an acrobatic overtime goal from Kirill Marchenko. The win in Las Vegas moved the Blue Jackets (25-19-7) back into the second wild card in the Eastern Conference by a point over the Boston Bruins (25-22-6).

Need a break? Play the USA TODAY Daily Crossword Puzzle.

The Jackets will now face Utah in Salt Lake City on Friday night while attempting to sweep a back-to-back for the first time this season. They'll also seek their first win in the second game of a back-to-back set.

In the first game, the Blue Jackets and Golden Knights each scored in the first period of what developed into a tight-checking defensive tilt between two of the NHL's highest-scoring teams. Vegas outshot Columbus 26-24, but neither team created many "Grade A" scoring chances. Each team prevented goals via key saves from Samsonov and Elvis Merzlikins (25 saves) plus timely blocked shots.

Tomas Hertl opened the scoring 4:58 into the game, giving the Golden Knights (31-15-6) a 1-0 lead on his 20th goal while extending his point streak to 11 straight games. It took most of the period, but the Blue Jackets countered with Adam Fantilli's 15th goal, which tied it 1-1 with 1:26 left in the opening frame.

The second-year center, who's anchoring the top line with Sean Monahan out, dug the puck out from a scramble in the Vegas crease and watched it deflect into the net off the skate of Golden Knights defenseman Nicolas Hague. That was all the scoring until Sillinger scored in OT. Merzlikins and Samsonov made some critical stops to keep it knotted at 1-1 in the second and third, while their teammates clogged the slots and occupied shooting lanes at both ends of the ice.

"One of our keys was to try to be a frustrating group tonight," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said on the FanDuel Sports network postgame broadcast. "That meant not opening things up and that meant not giving them any life, and then making it a boring game. So, if that makes it look like it's a little bit of a 'slow start,' fine. We're OK with that, right? If we can stick around in games like this, buildings like this and (against) teams like this, then it says some good things."

Each goalie also got help from the crossbars behind them in the third.

Samsonov was spared a goal by the bar early on a backhand attempt from Marchenko just outside the left post, while Merzlikins heard the ping of good fortune late in the period after a hard wrist shot from Vegas defenseman Shea Theodore. That's how the game went to OT, which was the fourth time in the past eight games the Jackets have needed longer than regulation to decide the outcome.

"I thought both teams were playing a good defensive game," Sillinger told Maetzold. "We just stuck with it and got the extra point in overtime."

The Athletic / Damon Severson's return to form could be crucial for Blue Jackets' stretch run

By Aaron Portzline – January 31, 2025

LAS VEGAS — One month ago, Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Damon Severson was in the headlines for all of the wrong reasons: garish turnovers, lengthy benchings and healthy scratches, the sad progression of a veteran blue liner who had lost his way.

A funny thing has happened over the last three weeks: nobody's talking about Severson's play these days, even though they should be.

The Blue Jackets relegated Severson to the third pairing once they recalled top defensive prospect Denton Mateychuk from AHL Cleveland, and his ice time has dipped because of it. But Severson has reclaimed his game by taking a noticeably more conservative approach.

"I'm just being myself," Severson said. "Simple plays. Those plays we've talked about (the turnovers) ... nobody says anything about it if it works out, right? But if it doesn't, you're in trouble. So why even risk it?"

"I'd rather play than have to deal with all of that crap."

It's probably hard to imagine what a healthy scratch feels like for a veteran player, much less one in the second year of an eight-year contract that carries a \$6.25 million salary cap hit.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason, who ultimately made the decision to sit Severson, played more than 800 games in the NHL.

"All of your emotions come into it," Evason said. "You're mad, embarrassed, pissed off ... all of it. But he used it in the right direction.

"He didn't disrupt his teammates because of it. I don't want to say he accepted it because he didn't, right? He didn't want to be out of the lineup. But he handled it the right way. Like a professional. If you're positive and your attitude is correct, which his was, you're going to be all right when you get back in."

Since enduring back-to-back healthy scratches on Jan. 4 vs. the St. Louis Blues and Jan. 7 vs. the Pittsburgh Penguins, Severson is back to being a lineup regular. In nine games, he has 0-3-3 and a plus-6 rating, averaging 16:16 in ice time per game.

The Blue Jackets will lean on him again at 10 p.m. tonight when they open a crucial four-game road trip against the Vegas Golden Knights in T-Mobile Arena.

"(Severson) has been playing simple and he's competing," Evason said. "When you get guys with a skill set like he has, sometimes you try to do too much. That was our only message (as a coaching staff). He's simplified in areas where maybe there were turnovers in the past. It's been an effort, a conscious effort to simplify his game."

Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski took exception to some of the criticism that's been levied at Severson during his two seasons in Columbus.

"I think a lot of it is unfair," Werenski said. "He's a guy who's been around for a long time, 700-plus games. When he makes a mistake and it ends up in our net, it doesn't look great. But if it doesn't end up in our net, is anybody talking about it? I make a lot of mistakes, too. That tying goal in our last game (by

the Los Angeles Kings late in regulation on Saturday): I shoot it up the middle twice (clearing attempts) and it finally hits a guy and they score. It happens.

“Guys who play a lot of minutes, especially, are bound to make mistakes. Does everyone deserve to be criticized fairly if you’re not playing well? Of course. That’s the job. But he’s playing really well now. He’s been solid. He hasn’t been making those big mistakes. He’s played simple and hard, and he looks like himself again.”

The importance of a solid Severson cannot be overstated.

Just at face value, the Blue Jackets need a player with such a long-term contract to be a reliable, significant part of their lineup. Beyond that, they may need to rely on Severson more heavily down the stretch this season depending on how the NHL trade deadline plays out on March 7.

The Blue Jackets have had contract talks with veteran defenseman Ivan Provorov, a pending unrestricted free agent, who has switched the right side of the second pair to accommodate Mateychuk. GM Don Waddell has had talks with Provorov’s agent, Mark Gandler, about an extension, but it’s unclear if there’s a deal to be made.

The Blue Jackets would like to keep Provorov on a short-term contract. But Provorov is at an age — he turned 28 earlier this month — when most players hope to sign a seven- or eight-year contract.

There could be a middle ground in all of this. Waddell, who has plenty of salary cap space, could offer Provorov a short-term deal with a salary that’s above his market value to entice him. In fact, there is a very specific precedent for this.

On July 1, 2023, 31-year-old defenseman Dmitry Orlov was expected to land a big-ticket as a UFA — one pretty comparable to Provorov, actually. But instead of landing a monster contract, Orlov signed a two-year deal worth \$7.75 million per season with Carolina.

Orlov’s agent? Mark Gandler. Carolina’s GM? Don Waddell.

If Provorov says past the deadline, Severson could continue in a third-line role, although Evason will have a tough decision in late March or early April when sturdy veteran Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery) returns.

But if Provorov moves, Severson is a likely candidate to move up to the second pair in his place.

“I’m confident in my game,” Severson said. “I know what I can do. My teammates and coaches know it, too. What happens in a month or so is out of our control.

“But you look at our whole conference, and it’s going to be a dogfight to the end. It’s gonna be tough, but it’s so fun. The fans are into it. We’re into it. I’m not usually a big standings watcher, but we’ve got a lot of young guys in there who really care about stats, so I’m pretty up to date.”

[BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets begin road swing at Golden Knights](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 31, 2025

BLUE JACKETS (24-19-7) at GOLDEN KNIGHTS (31-15-5), 10 PM, T-MOBILE ARENA

After Saturday's win over Los Angeles, the Blue Jackets had something that has been in short supply this season in the NHL.

Time off.

The marathon that is the league schedule has felt like a sprint at times this season, including when the Blue Jackets played 13 times in the first 23 days of December leading into the holiday break.

So when the team looked at the schedule and saw four full days off after its last game, head coach Dean Evason saw it as the perfect chance for a mental and physical reset before tonight's game at Vegas.

"It's not just that we're off the ice and resting our legs and our bodies, it's forgetting about the game for a little bit," Evason said. "You get recharged and go do something else. We believe 100 percent that the mental end of it is as important as the physical end of it. You have that attitude that you're fresh and mentally positive, then you'll give yourself a good opportunity to compete and have success."

The Blue Jackets didn't practice either Sunday or Monday, giving the players two days away from the ice to recharge both the minds and the legs. So what did the players do with the time off? Some spent it with families if they're around, while others got caught up on the life things that often fall through the cracks in the midst of a hectic season.

For wing Zach Aston-Reese, that meant picking up his dry cleaning and shopping for curtains for his home in New Jersey.

"I was doing adult stuff," he said with a laugh after Tuesday's practice. "It's been good. It's definitely nice to get away from the rink a little bit, just reset. We had a really good practice today. I think everyone was flying out there."

The two practice days ahead of Wednesday's flight that kicks off a four-game road trip allowed Columbus to home in on just about everything on the ice, from 5-on-5 structure to the power play and penalty kill to specialty areas like 3-on-3 overtime and a team shootout competition won by Luca Del Bel Belluz.

"We haven't had a practice like this today with fresh bodies and all the bodies, so we want to work on everything," Evason said Tuesday. "We'll try to touch everything up. We're doing video as well to refresh our memory of how we want to play the game structurally, so it's been a nice little break as well as the practice time used in the right direction."

Know The Foe: Vegas Golden Knights

Head coach: Bruce Cassidy (Third season)

Team stats: Goals per game: 3.39 (4th) | Scoring defense: 2.76 (9th) | PP: 28.3 percent (2nd) | PK: 78.2 percent (20th)

The narrative: The 2023 Stanley Cup champs are seemingly in the mix for a championship every year, making the playoffs six of their first seven seasons and on pace to do so yet again. The Golden Knights failed to repeat a season ago, losing in the first round to Dallas, but should be in the mix yet again with a

veteran coach and an experienced roster – of the team’s top 14 scorers, 13 are age 26 or older – that knows how to win in the postseason.

Team leaders: Jack Eichel might be having the best season of his decorated career, as the now-28-year-old center is eighth in the NHL in scoring with a 16-48-64 line as well as a plus-27 rating on the season. Mark Stone adds 13 goals and 46 points in 37 games, while Shea Theodore is fourth among NHL blueliners with 44 points (six goals, 38 assists). Pavel Dorofeyev has a team-best 22 goals and eight in the last nine games, while Tomas Hertl has 19 on the year and also has scored eight times in the last nine. Brayden McNabb’s plus-29 rating ties Kirill Marchenko for the NHL lead.

Adin Hill leads the charge in net and is 19-9-4 with a 2.65 GAA and .901 save percentage, while Ilya Samsonov has a 2.78 GAA and .898 save percentage while going 12-6-1.

What's new: The Golden Knights were a certified wagon through 40 games, posting a 28-9-3 record and leading the NHL in points percentage. But the last three weeks have been a struggle, with Vegas just 3-6-2 in the last 11 games. The good news for the Golden Knights? For a change this time of year, everyone is healthy outside of former Blue Jackets forward William Karlsson (more on him in a second).

Trending: This is the first meeting of the season between the two teams, with the Jackets and Knights having split the 12 all-time meetings with six wins apiece. Columbus is just 2-4-0 in Vegas.

Former CBJ: Karlsson has a 7-11-18 line in 38 games on the season but was placed on injured reserve last week with a lower body injury.

Scratches: Kevin Labanc, Jordan Harris, Jack Johnson

Injured reserve, Injured/Non-Roster list: Sean Monahan (upper body), Yegor Chinakhov (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (upper body), Boone Jenner (upper body)

Roster Report: Sillinger practiced the past few days and is expected to return to the lineup after missing three games with an upper-body injury, while Jenner is on the trip as he continues to work his way back.

The Numbers Game

CBJ center Adam Fantilli is set to play in his 100th NHL game with a 26-29-55 line so far in his career. ... Since Dec. 19, the Blue Jackets are tied for fourth in the NHL in wins (12), tied for third in points percentage (.722), tied for second in goals per game (3.44) and second in power-play percentage (33.3). ... Elvis Merzlikins is 9-2-1 in his last 12 starts and has posted a 1.80 GAA and .934 save percentage in his last five games. ... Zach Werenski has a 13-31-44 line in the last 35 games and has 22 points (5-17-22) in the past 16. His average ice time of 26:47 leads all NHL players, and he’s second among league defensemen in goals (16) and tied for third in points (54) on the season. He is three points shy of the CBJ single-season record of 57 points by a defenseman, set by Seth Jones in 2017-18 and equaled by Werenski a season ago. ... With his 20th goal of the season Saturday, Kirill Marchenko became the first CBJ player ever to reach that mark in each of his first three NHL seasons. He has a 10-16-26 line in the last 21 games and 37 points in the last 31 (14-23-37). He is tied for the NHL lead with a plus-29 rating. ... Dmitri Voronkov has 21 points (11-10-21) in the last 20 games. ... Fantilli has a 7-6-13 line in the last 12 games, while James van Riemsdyk has notched a 6-6-12 line in that span. ... Kent Johnson has seven points (3-4-7) in the past six games as well as a four-game point streak. ... Luca Del Bel Belluz has eight points (3-5-8) in his first 10 career NHL games, second-most in CBJ history (Werenski, 10 in 2015-16). ... Mathieu Olivier is one of two NHL players (Ottawa’s Brady Tkachuk) with 10-plus goals, 60 penalty minutes and 100 hits this season. ... Columbus is first in the NHL with 116 goals at 5-on-5, and their 3.30 goals per game are seventh in the league. In addition, the Blue Jackets have scored at least six goals 10 times in 51 games this season, one shy of a franchise record (2018-19). ... Columbus has scored on 17 of

57 power plays (29.8 percent) in the last 23 games and is now 11th in the NHL for the season in power-play percentage at 22.6. ... Blue Jackets defensemen have 32 goals this season, most in the NHL. ... Cole Sillinger is three points from 100 in his NHL career while Ivan Provorov is three assists from 100.

This Day in CBJ History

Jan. 30, 2009: Steve Mason makes 17 saves in the seventh shutout of his rookie career as the Blue Jackets earn a 1-0 victory vs. Ottawa at Nationwide Arena. Jakub Voracek scores for Columbus in just the fourth 1-0 win in franchise history.

Jan. 30, 2010: Kris Russell scores 1:32 into overtime to push the Blue Jackets to a 3-2 victory at St. Louis.

Jan. 30, 2024: Elvis Merzlikins stops 21 shots to earn the 10th shutout of his career and Dmitri Voronkov scores the only goal of the game as the Blue Jackets take a 1-0 win at St. Louis.

[BlueJackets.com / Talent, chemistry pushing CBJ power play to new heights](#)

By Garrison McDaniel – January 31, 2025

Since the Blue Jackets joined the NHL in 2000, they have finished in the league's top 10 on the power play only one time.

That year was 2014-15, when they finished at 21.7 percent on the man advantage, good for a tie for fifth in the league.

But that could change this season, as the Blue Jackets own their highest power-play percentage as a franchise at 22.6 percent, good for 11th in the league. In 18 games since Dec. 19, the Blue Jackets have scored on 12 of 36 opportunities, good for second in the NHL.

The top unit for the Blue Jackets has excelled this year, totaling 24 of the team's 28 goals. Although a few injuries have made the unit change throughout the year, the group has primarily stayed together and been able to build chemistry that is turning into success.

"It's that connection of keeping the units together, where they know where each other are," said assistant coach Mike Haviland, who helps run the power play. "It's like a line or a pair of D; the longer they play together, the more they kind of read off of each other."

Haviland has been a key to the success for the Blue Jackets this year. This is his first year with the NHL squad after he spent the previous two seasons working with its AHL affiliate in Cleveland, helping bring the team to the Eastern Conference Final of the Calder Cup playoffs a season ago.

Haviland's experience at all levels in hockey, including a four-year stint with the Chicago Blackhawks where he helped them win a Stanley Cup, has boosted the team and has brought individual buy-in from each of the players on the team.

"I think he prepares us every night to go out there and have success," Werenski said. "He shows us the other team's penalty kill before every game, shows us what can work against it, and then when we work on it in practice, it's the same message. You should be direct, move the puck quickly, get it to the (net) as fast as we can. I think we've done that this year. I think we've all bought into what (Haviland) has kind of been teaching us, and I think when everyone has a collective buy-in, it obviously makes things a lot easier."

There is much difference in personnel between this season and the previous one. This year, the top unit has usually featured Zach Werenski as the quarterback, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko on the flanks, Sean Monahan as the bumper and Dmitri Voronkov at the net front, with Adam Fantilli filling in when Johnson and Monahan have had to miss time with injury.

One of the biggest changes has been the emergence of Johnson, the highly skilled forward who has taken a massive step in his development this season and has been a key to this unit. A master of puck possession with a good eye for passes, he's scored two goals and added eight assists on the man advantage this year.

"He's got that vision and that hockey sense," Haviland said. "We talk a lot about getting the puck and skating out of traffic with it. He does that really well. He can separate himself to give himself an extra second or two, where something else will open up."

Johnson has prided himself on being able to create space for his teammates, either by holding on to the puck or making a fake that causes defenders to back off. He said that is something he has picked up from repetition and from watching others in the NHL like Patrick Kane and Artemi Panarin.

“Being on the power play for so long, you figure out certain spots where the PK is vulnerable, when they want to pressure,” Johnson said. “A lot of it is honestly, it’s like, I’m about to pass it to Z or someone and I see the PKer’s feet start to turn like he’s expecting me to pass, and then you just hold on to the puck. It’s such a good feeling. Like you basically do nothing, but they back off from a little shaft fake or head fake or whatever. It’s a cool feeling.

“It’s something I’ve watched. Other guys do it. I think Panarin does it really well and Kane and those guys. It’s fun to make plays like that that are subtle.”

Along with the many things that have made this power-play unit click, Werenski’s career year may be right up there at the top of the list. His five goals on the power play place him second on the team as well as tied for second in the league among defensemen in that regard. He is firmly within the top of the league at quarterbacking the power play.

“He’s been great,” Johnson said. “He’s been running power play for a long time, and I think he definitely knows how to do it well. He’s been I think even better this year, like scoring more and just really easy to play with as a half-wall guy. He puts it where I want it almost every time I want it, so it’s perfect. Definitely the best quarterback I’ve played with.”

The revitalization of the team’s zone entries has also been a welcomed adjustment for the Blue Jackets as Haviland has done a lot of work to make sure they have improved in that area.

“I think you gotta give them different looks,” Haviland said. “I mean, everybody does the two-man drop, right? But I think we’ve gone through a one-man drop. We’ve done three back, we’ve done four back. I think you’ve got to give different looks to different teams.”

Speed kills, and when the Blue Jackets were being built through the draft and trades, that attribute was most definitely in mind as each player on the top unit can skate fast and well.

“I think a lot of it for us is the speed,” Haviland said. “You got to come with speed. You know, there’s that combination when you have guys that can control the puck like (Marchenko) and (Werenski) and (Johnson) and (Fantilli). I think you’ll get a lot of success on your entries.”

All the previous reasons have been important for the production of the power-play unit this season, but the group also has been given a huge boost by its secret weapon, Dmitri Voronkov.

A commanding netfront presence at 6-foot-5 but also boasting the hands to score in tight areas, Voronkov leads the team in power-play goals with seven. According to Werenski, he’s also been a big reason the defenseman has scored so many goals from the point.

“For me, on the goals I’ve scored up top, a lot of it has to do with (Voronkov), how big he is in screening the goalie and just delivering pucks to the blue, to be honest,” Werenski said. “I think the netfront guy and the bumper guys are the most important positions on the power play. A lot of guys in this league have skill, and sometimes all that skill, the power plays don’t work. And I feel like it’s because you don’t have a guy netfront that’s screening the goalies and making it hard on them. We have that right now.”

“We know what the most high-danger plays are; obviously (Voronkov) at the net there is one of the biggest ones,” Johnson said. “So (Marchenko), he’s been really good finding him, and scored quite a lot there. So, yeah, it’s been good.”

Add it all up and talented players are making plays to allow the Blue Jackets to thrive. Many of those pieces are young players who are learning on the job and starting to have a big impact on the success of the unit.

“I think (Marchenko and Johnson) are allowed to play with more freedom right now and make their plays,” Werenski said. “If they make mistakes, they're allowed to learn from them.”

[The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets \(55 pts\) vs. Vegas Golden Knights \(67 pts\) Game Preview](#)

By Jason Newland – January 31, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets are in Las Vegas to play the Golden Knights on Thursday. Tonight's game marks the last 10 PM EST game for Columbus.

The Blue Jackets haven't played a game since last Saturday night when they beat the LA Kings at home. This could be good, or it could be bad.

Vegas is a team that is rarely beaten at home and usually steamrolls teams at T-Mobile Arena, so the CBJ will have their work cut out for them, especially since Columbus is not usually good on the road. Vegas is 19-6-2 at home.

It's no secret that the VGK are very good. They're 2nd on the power play, 10th on the PK, and are 2nd in the fewest PIMs given up. They score a ton of goals and are currently 3rd in the league, while only giving up the 10th fewest amount of goals.

Columbus has their work cut out for them. The advantage for the Jackets, if there is one, is that the Knights have played two games already this week, while Columbus hasn't played since last Saturday. In theory, they should be rested and ready for the Vegas steamroll.

Series History vs. The Golden Knights

- Columbus is 2-4-0 on the road and 6-5-1 in 12 all-time meetings vs. Vegas.
- The Jackets are 2-1-1 in the last four.

Who To Watch For The Golden Knights

Jack Eichel leads the team with 48 assists and 64 points. He also has 22 points in 20 games vs. the CBJ.

- Pavel Dorofeyev leads the team with 22 goals.
- Ilya Samsonov is 12-6 with a .898 SV%.
- Adin Hill is 19-9 with a .901 SV%.

CBJ Player Notes vs. The Golden Knights

- Zach Werenski has 7 points in 10 games against Vegas.
- Kirill Marchenko has 4 points in 3 games.
- Cole Sillinger has 4 points in 6 career games vs. the Knights.

Injuries

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (50 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (47 Games)
- **Yegor Chinakhov** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve (29 Games)
- **Sean Monahan** (upper body); is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Dec. 7 (9 Games)

TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 210

[The Hockey News / Could Columbus Be Players In The J.T. Miller Sweepstakes?](#)

By Spencer Lazary – January 31, 2025

Today on social media, a mind-boggling trade proposal involving the Columbus Blue Jackets started making the rounds.

The trade had the Blue Jackets acquiring Vancouver Canucks star forward J.T. Miller. However, it also had Columbus sending Ivan Provorov, Gavin Brindley, and a 2025 first-round pick in return.

Miller, 31, is an Ohio native, which could be one reason he might agree to waive his no-movement clause to play for Columbus. Another big factor would likely be the smaller media presence. Miller has played for big-market teams like the New York Rangers and the aforementioned Canucks, which appears to have made life a bit tougher on him. Columbus, with its lower media pressure, might be a destination he would consider.

So far this season, Miller has nine goals and 26 assists for 35 points in 40 games. However, last season, when there was less outside noise, he put up 103 points in 81 games.

As for his contract, he has six more years remaining at \$8 million per season. His deal also includes a full no-movement clause, which transitions into a modified no-trade clause in 2027-28.

Could the Blue Jackets be a good fit for Miller?

Let us know—leave a comment below and tell Jason and me if you think trading for J.T. Miller would be a good idea!

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Reunion With Saad Would Benefit Both Sides

By William Espy – January 31, 2025

It's been nearly a decade since Brandon Saad took the ice as a member of the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The Pittsburgh, PA native is set to become an unrestricted free agent after agreeing to a contract termination with the St. Louis Blues, and the Blue Jackets' injuries have made them a prime candidate to add some depth as soon as possible. As a result, speculation has run rampant about whether or not a reunion between the two sides would make sense.

Big Changes in Columbus and For Saad

When Saad last played for the Blue Jackets, things were substantially different. John Tortorella was behind the bench. Bill Zito was Jarmo Kekalainen's assistant general manager, still waiting for his opportunity to take over the Florida Panthers and ultimately win the Stanley Cup. Cam Atkinson led the team in scoring, while Brandon Dubinsky, Scott Hartnell and Sergei Bobrovsky were all still important players for the organization and Alex Wennberg was driving his head coach nuts by refusing to shoot the puck.

Since then, we've seen almost the entire roster turn over, with only Zach Werenski and Boone Jenner remaining. Two rookie head coaches, Brad Larsen and Pascal Vincent, failed to make an impact and a new management team took over.

Things have changed considerably for Saad as well. He's no longer the highly-touted 22-year-old with high potential, coming off of two recent Stanley Cup wins with the Chicago Blackhawks. He's gone back

to Chicago, spent some time in Colorado and then moved on to St. Louis. Now, he's an aging veteran in the back half of his career with his prime either nearing an end or behind him entirely.

Saad Is a Strong Fit in Columbus

There are a few reasons why a return to Columbus would make sense for Saad, even though it'll be reuniting with mainly just the city and fans rather than former teammates. His best offensive years came as a member of the Blue Jackets. He finished with 53 points in both the 2015-16 and 2016-17 seasons, which remains a career-high. In his first season in Columbus, he eclipsed the 30-goal mark for the only time in his career when he found the back of the net 31 times in 78 games. Even though the team didn't find much success during his time in Union Blue, he found a considerable amount of individual success.

For Saad, Columbus would be a great environment for him to come back to. It's a city he's familiar with, they're battling for the playoffs and the current injury situation allows him to immediately slot into the lineup. While he'd likely be a bottom-six forward once everyone is healthy, he easily could play up in the lineup and regain his confidence as well. Considering James van Riemsdyk is currently on the second line, Saad could easily take that spot as a more offensive threat and allow van Riemsdyk to slide back to the third or fourth line.

Oddly enough, coming to Columbus would also take a considerable amount of pressure off of Saad as well. It's rare that's the case for a team fighting for a playoff spot, but the team has already exceeded all expectations this season. No matter what happens, this has been a season that Blue Jackets fans will look back on fondly, although playoffs would undoubtedly be the icing on the cake. If Saad could help them reach that goal, it would only increase his popularity in Columbus.

Meanwhile, for the organization, some of the aspects of Saad's game that made him worth acquiring a decade ago are still present. He's still a two-time Stanley Cup champion, who will bring some leadership that he was taught by one of the NHL's greatest captains of this past generation, Jonathan Toews. As recently as last season, he showed that he still has the ability to contribute offensively as he scored 26 goals in 82 games.

This season, Saad played almost everywhere imaginable in the Blues' lineup. He spent the most time with Robert Thomas and Pavel Buchnevich, who have had strange seasons of their own as they were benched recently against the Utah Hockey Club (from 'Blues' Robert Thomas opens up on his offensive slump,' *The Athletic*, Jan 24, 2025). That line combination only played 71:30 of ice time together though, and Saad bounced around a considerable amount, spending time with Brayden Schenn, Dylan Holloway, Oskar Sundqvist and almost everyone else on the team at certain points of the season. Ultimately, in his final game as a Blue, he played alongside Zach Bolduc and Nathan Walker.

Although Saad's offensive numbers have dropped a bit this season (16 points in 43 games), he typically earns praise for his efforts defensively as well. Considering the Blue Jackets don't have a problem scoring – they're currently seventh in the league in goals for – but struggle defensively, Saad could be a big addition for his defense alone.

Ultimately, a reunion with Saad makes a lot of sense at this point in time. He's not the player that he was during his last stint in Columbus, but the current iteration of the Blue Jackets don't need him to be. He'd be a strong addition to the bottom-six who could contribute at both ends of the ice. If the Blue Jackets get lucky though, he could be even more than that. His contract was the main reason he passed through waivers unclaimed, but for the right price, he's still a valuable NHL player.

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day #51: Cole Sillinger Returns To Lineup As Blue Jackets Face Golden Knights Thursday Night

By Ed Francis – January 31, 2025

Cole Sillinger will return to the lineup Thursday night when the Columbus Blue Jackets take the ice for the first time this week.

The game against the Vegas Golden Knights kicks off a four-game road trip for the Blue Jackets, and it's their first game since Saturday's overtime win against the Los Angeles Kings.

Sillinger missed three games with an upper body injury.

"When I was out, I got to watch from up above (in the press box), and you learn some things, you see the game from a different perspective," said Sillinger. "I thought that was helpful and beneficial for my game personally."

Getting Sillinger back into the lineup adds the 21-year-old's seven goals and 16 assists in 45 games this season, but it's more about the return of a player that can play in any situation: even-strength, on the power play, and on the penalty kill.

With Sean Monahan still out and time added to his original anticipated return, Sillinger will be a key middle-six player over the Blue Jackets' final six games before the two-week break for the Four Nations Face-Off.

Here's what else to know as Columbus has their final 10 p.m. puck-drop of the season:

- **RE: KNIGHTS**

Ilya Samsonov will be Vegas' starting netminder. He's 12-6-1 in his 19 starts this season, posting an above-average goals against average of 2.78 but a below-average save percentage of .898. ... Pavel Dorofeyev is in the midst of a breakout season. The 24-year-old Russian leads the Knights in goals (22), including three in his last five games. ... After beginning the month with three straight wins, Vegas now has just three wins in their last ten games.

- **ANOTHER START FOR ELVIS**

Elvis Merzlikins has been playing some of his best hockey in years over the last number of weeks, with his goals against average of 2.95 under 3 for the first time since the 2020-21 season. He's won six of his last seven starts with a .917 save percentage in those games.

- **100 FOR MO'**

Thursday's contest is the 100th NHL game for Adam Fantilli. He has 26 goals and 29 assists for 55 points through the first 99 games, but has come into his own lately since taking Monahan's spot as the top center on the depth center. Fantilli has seven goals and six assists (13 points) in his 12 games in January thus far, and has averaged over 19 minutes per game since then — including a career high 25:58 in Saturday's win.

- **LINEUPS & PROJECTIONS**

Sillinger's return to the lineup puts the Blue Jackets back in a traditional 12 forward/6 defenseman set; they had playing with 11/7 when Sillinger was out.

[1st Ohio Battery / Columbus Blue Jackets Continue To Be A "Team To Talk About" Should The Vancouver Canucks Trade Elias Pettersson, Per Report](#)

By Ed Francis – January 31, 2025

The link between Elias Pettersson and the Columbus Blue Jackets won't go away.

Thursday, those rumors were given a fresh set of legs.

Pierre LeBrun of *The Athletic* and *TSN* said on the latter's "Insider Trading" that the Blue Jackets have had "very recent" talks with the Vancouver Canucks about Pettersson.

The Canucks have been a disappointment this season, with a large part of that involving the on-going tiff between two of their star players: J.T. Miller and Pettersson. It seems inevitable that Vancouver will have to move one of them, with both players signed to long-term contracts.

Earlier this week, Vancouver President of Hockey Operations Jim Rutherford confirmed the spat between the players, saying "there's too much going on in the room for everybody to concentrate on what they're supposed to do."

Enter the Blue Jackets.

With loads of cap space, draft picks, and prospects, Columbus is one of very few ideal trading partners for Vancouver for when an eventual move is made.

"Certainly, a team to talk about would be the Columbus Blue Jackets," LeBrun said on *Insider Trading*. "It's not surprising because they've got massive salary cap space and so as the Canucks make their

rounds and talk to different teams on both J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson, the conversation with the Jackets is on Elias Pettersson."

"We'll see whether these preliminary discussions, some of them very recent, can go next-level," said LeBrun.

Pettersson, 26, is in the first year of a massive, eight-year contract extension he received less than a year ago. His annual cap hit will be \$11.6 million through the 2031-32 season, at which point he'll be 33 years old.

The Swedish center has struggled this season, scoring just 11 goals and adding 21 assists for 32 points through 44 games. But in each of the last three seasons, Pettersson notched at least 30 goals in each year and had 102 and 89 points in the last two full seasons, respectively.

Whether or not it's the tiff with Miller or if something else afoot is a key question for any team considering such a large, long-term investment.

"I think for Columbus it's the same question that all the other teams that have talked to Vancouver have — including a team like Buffalo — who is Elias Pettersson right now? The Pettersson of old warranted that massive extension, but the one we've seen over the past year has a lot of teams wondering how much they want to give up," said LeBrun.

The acquisition of a player like Pettersson would, despite his struggles this season, make an immediate impact for any team in the NHL.

Already a four-time NHL All-Star, Pettersson is a true center and while that (for the first time in a long time, or perhaps ever) is not a dire need for the Blue Jackets right now, there's no such thing as having too many centers. That's been proven this season with the injuries to top centers Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner, despite Adam Fantilli blossoming in his expanded role over recent weeks.

There was no mention as to what the Blue Jackets might give in return or what the Canucks' asking price is, but LeBrun speculated that it could become a bit of a waiting game.

"What I'm sensing around the market, whether it's Miller or Pettersson, is teams are waiting to see if the Canucks are willing to bring their asking price down on either player before they engage more fully," said LeBrun.

While a trade would almost certainly involve multiple players, it is worth noting that Vancouver is limited on future high-round draft capital. The Canucks are without a third-round pick in both 2025 and 2026 and are without their second-rounder in 2027.

Columbus, meanwhile, has two first-rounders this summer, six picks in the first four rounds in 2026, and five picks in the first three rounds of the 2027 draft — much of that as a result of the David Jiricek trade earlier this season.

For a Blue Jackets team that is on the bubble of an unexpected playoff berth, the waiting game is a smart one to play. How they play over the next number of weeks — particularly in the six games before the Four Nations Face-Off Break — could determine their true level of interest in Pettersson and what they're willing to part with to get him.

Depending on the return, adding Pettersson around the same time that Jenner and Monahan come back from injuries would provide Columbus with all the momentum in the world to not only make the postseason, but make noise in it, too.

1st Ohio Battery / Amid Historic Season, Who Else But Werenski To Be Leading Rejuvenated Blue Jackets

By Will Chase – January 31, 2025

Saturday marks the start of February and the Columbus Blue Jackets are not only playing meaningful hockey.

They're thick within the Eastern Conference wild-card race. What could be better?

If you ask Zach Werenski, he only cares about helping his team win and doing whatever it takes to get the job done every night.

On a team full of daily contributors, Werenski has led in various ways, from the back end on the blue line to scoring goals and setting up his teammates for goals.

Always professional and diplomatic in his dealings with the media, Werenski seems likelier to want to talk about anything else but his 19-game home point streak, which is tied for the fifth most by a defenseman in NHL history.

But with a historic point streak or not, there's no denying that in a season in which the franchise has defied heavily stacked odds against them since day 1, no one is driving the bus quite like Werenski.

A potential Norris candidate and someone who could garner a vote or two for the Hart — the last defenseman to win the Hart for league MVP was Chris Pronger in 2000 — Werenski is personally dominating like no season prior.

It's fun to root for a guy like that who chose to stay in Columbus, his only NHL home when he re-signed for six seasons in July 2021 at \$57.5 million through 2027-28.

Still only 27 years old, Werenski is entrenched as one of the primary pillars of the franchise, donning the 'A' as an alternate captain. He's one of the few players on the current roster to experience playoff hockey in Columbus, playing during the best stretch in Blue Jackets history under the John Davidson and Jarmo Kekalainen regime, led by head coach John Tortorella.

Following a Calder Cup championship with the then-Lake Erie — now Cleveland Monsters — in 2015-16, Werenski burst onto the scene during his first NHL season in 2016-17, scoring 47 points, a rookie franchise record (11 goals, 36 assists) in 78 games. He finished third in the Calder voting for top rookie and made the All-Rookie team.

Since the team's inception in 2000, Werenski is fourth with 356 points, trailing Boone Jenner by eight points for third overall, and is second all-time in Blue Jackets history with 250 assists, trailing Rick Nash by eight.

Among all Blue Jackets defensemen, he's third in games played (536), trailing Fedor Tyutin (553), and David Savard (597). Werenski is first in goals (106), assists, points, and a huge part of the power play, leading the way with 25 power-play goals and 111 power-play points in his career.

As a Blue Jacket, he's seen it all, from the historic sweep of the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2019 to the unprecedented COVID year and the playoff bubble a season later. Werenski has overcome injuries such as in 2022-23 when he was limited to 13 games after a separated shoulder and torn labrum.

He went through a career-long 38-game goalless drought last season while still setting a career-best 57 points, tying Seth Jones for the most points in franchise history for a defenseman, and setting the all-time mark for assists in a season by a d-man with 46 to go with his 11 goals.

Werenski currently leads the Jackets with 54 points, 38 assists, and is third with 16 goals.

Among all defensemen in the league, Werenski is third in points, trailing Cale Makar by two (56) and Quinn Hughes by four (58), second in goals, trailing Makar by two (18), and in a four-way tie for second in assists trailing Hughes by six (44). Werenski is tied for second with Makar in points per game (1.08), trailing Hughes (1.26).

- Head-to-head (5v5) comparison of Quinn Hughes, last year's Norris winner, and Werenski.
- Head-to-head (5v5) comparison of Cale Makar, the 2021-22 Norris winner, and Werenski.

Natural Stat Trick

With 32 games remaining, there's plenty of time for Werenski to keep pace and even pass those in front of him in the Norris race, perhaps even for the Hart. And track down the longest home point streaks in NHL history.

If you asked him about it, you can bet his answer only has to do with helping his team win games and fight for the playoffs.

[The Athletic / What we learned about the NHL in January: Impact of the Mikko Rantanen trade and more](#)

By Shayna Goldman – January 31, 2025

There is always a lot to analyze around an NHL trade — the cost of acquisition on both sides of the deal, the fit and the ripples throughout the trade market. But maybe one of the most interesting elements to consider is the timing of a deal, especially for in-season trades.

The timing of a trade can affect the cost in some cases. A middle-six center can be worth one thing in late January and a lot more in early March, depending on how other teams set the market and the demand for that position around the league. When elite talent is involved, though, the bar starts high and stays high no matter the timing. Trading for Mikko Rantanen in late January versus the deadline likely wouldn't have drastically changed the cost unless there was a dramatic market shift over the next few weeks or an outright bidding war. And by making this deal weeks out from the deadline, Carolina gets more bang for its buck — up to 14 extra games of action with Rantanen (and Taylor Hall) in the fold.

Not only does this make the deal more cost-effective, it also gives everyone a chance to assess the situation before the rapidly approaching deadline. Players have more time to adjust and gel in their surroundings, which can help the decision-making process on both sides of the equation. In Rantanen's case, he has more time to decide whether or not he likes playing with the Hurricanes. Management has an opportunity to evaluate the team with Rantanen and Hall in the fold, which should help shape the team's direction in the weeks leading up to March 7. The same goes for the Avalanche, who brought in Martin Necas and Jack Drury and now have a bit more cap space to work with before the deadline.

The advantages of that timing need to be front of mind for the rest of the league, especially in the days leading up to the 4 Nations Face-Off break.

Special teams impact of Colorado's additions

Despite rolling out a top unit of Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Rantanen this season, the Avalanche's power-play attack has been far from lethal. From the season start to Dec. 31, Colorado's expected goal generation of 8.31 per 60 was just below league average, but its scoring rate (9.01 goals per 60) brought the team up to ninth place.

That production dried up in January, with Colorado falling to 28th in expected goal generation (6.71 per 60) and second-to-last in scoring with just 2.77 goals per 60 in its 11 games before the trade.

Rantanen was far from the problem in Colorado, but adding Necas should infuse a new element into an area of play that needs it. There is only so much to draw from three games and less than 11 minutes of power-play time, but the early returns are positive for Necas on the advantage.

Just take their 2:22 minutes of power-play time against the Rangers last Sunday. Necas earned a secondary assist on Makar's power-play goal in the first.

Then, on the Avalanche's second opportunity of the game, the Rangers managed one early clear. After that, Colorado's top unit pinned them in their own zone for the remaining 1:27 of the advantage. Necas helped cycle the puck in the zone, set up his new teammates and generated two dangerous chances that hit the post. If that's a sign of what's to come, it could breathe some life into a unit that surprisingly struggled through much of January.

On the other end of the ice, Drury could add some support to a short-handed unit that needs it.

Colorado's penalty kill also trended down in January to allow the fourth-highest rate of expected goals against, at 10.9 per 60. Those short-handed lapses haven't always been as glaring because goaltending has held a lot off the scoresheet. Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood have saved a league-high 5.4 goals above expected in January while short-handed.

Drury wasn't a leading penalty killer with the Hurricanes, but he still played about 26 percent of the available short-handed time before the trade. And that should help fill a void left by Valeri Nichushkin's absence, and even last year's trade deadline addition Yakov Trenin, who departed as a free agent.

Rantanen and Hall's influence on the middle of the ice

The Corsi Canes have stayed true to their name, with the most shot volume at five-on-five and the highest expected goal rate. But one area of the ice could use more emphasis: the middle. The heat map below visualizes that, with the Hurricanes' heaviest areas of offensive creation pictured in red.

Via HockeyViz

Adding both Rantanen and Hall should help change that.

One of Rantanen's biggest strengths is generating scoring chances. He's a dynamic winger who can win puck battles and drive his shots right to the middle of the ice at five-on-five. Rantanen's scoring ability draws defenders in, which can open up his teammates for a high-danger pass.

That was already on display in Rantanen's first two games with his new team. The Canes had a 16-10 shot attempt advantage and a 79 percent expected goal rate in his minutes against the Islanders last Saturday. The numbers weren't as tilted against the Rangers, but the winger still affected the scoresheet.

It's only been a few games, so the question is how well he will fit there in the long run, especially without Nathan MacKinnon. Rantanen hasn't always had to be the play driver on his line, and he isn't

much of a puck transporter at five-on-five. He never had to be, with a zone-entry machine at his side. And one of the Canes' best carriers, Necas, went the other way in this deal.

So the complexion of Carolina's offense will change, and so will Rantanen's approach because as good as Sebastian Aho is in transition, he isn't in the same stratosphere as MacKinnon. But if the early returns are a glimpse of what is to come, Rantanen should help his new team kick their offense up a level.

Hall should also help, just in a different capacity in the middle six. His five-on-five scoring rate plummeted in Chicago over the last year, but it wasn't for a lack of trying. Hall ranked highly not just relative to the Blackhawks but across the league in controlled entries and primary shot assists this year, according to All Three Zones.

Against the Rangers on Tuesday night, his puck movement shined with setups to Andrei Svechnikov and Eric Robinson.

With Svechnikov in particular, this is something to watch. His shot volume and quality are up this year at five-on-five, but he has struggled to convert on those chances. Maybe Hall's passing can help change that, giving the Hurricanes more reliable goal scoring from the middle.

Thompson earns himself an extension in Washington

Despite Charlie Lindgren's emergence as the Capitals' starter down the stretch last season, management still looked for reinforcements in the offseason. And now Logan Thompson is shaping up to be one of their most savvy deals of 2024.

While the workload distribution has been perfectly even through most of the season, with the two rotating every other game, Thompson has shined the most. Through his first 21 games, he saved 16.5 goals above expected and earned a 0.919 save percentage. But his most impressive stretch of the season came after that when Thompson took a true starting role while Lindgren was injured. He gave the Capitals a chance to win with quality starts in all five of his consecutive starts and saved 11 goals above expected along the way.

The Capitals have since returned to their even split in net now that Lindgren is back, but that stretch of play was encouraging for when (or if) this team needs Thompson to take over the starter's net. Based on past precedent for teams with a shared crease, that could be the plan for the playoffs.

Thompson's first half in Washington (plus his time in Vegas) was enough for Washington to bet on him for another six years at \$5.85 million a year on average. Since he doesn't have an extensive track record as a true starting goalie, or even a 1A, there is some risk associated with the signing. However, it aligns with the goalie market reset earlier this year after some key signings, such as Jeremy Swayman in Boston and Joey Daccord in Seattle.

Extreme special teams in Vegas

The Golden Knights' power play has truly become an advantage. Vegas came into the season hot on the power play before slowing down in mid-November and December. But the team got back on track in January. The Golden Knights have notched at least one power-play goal in 10 of their last 12 games before Thursday's tilt against the Blue Jackets.

Most of that success comes from a top unit led by Jack Eichel, Mark Stone, Tomas Hertl and Shea Theodore. Pavel Dorofeyev rounds out that group as a shooting presence on the wing.

Heading into Thursday night, the team converted on 28.3 percent of its opportunities through 50 games, which landed them third in the league behind the Devils and Jets. And their play below the surface backs that up. The team does a lot of damage from the high-danger areas in the net-front area, up the middle

of the ice and from the circles. That adds up to about 10.1 expected goals per 60, which ranks behind only the Devils. Vegas' scoring efficiency and expected goal creation this season are the best of its eight-year existence.

But not all special teams are an advantage for Vegas. Surprisingly, its penalty kill has been somewhat of a weakness. In January, the team slipped into the bottom 10 in expected and actual goal suppression even while matching up to lesser teams like the Sharks and Blackhawks.

The Golden Knights went six-for-six while short-handed against the Stars and Panthers earlier this week, which is at least a step in the right direction after some concerning trends throughout the month.

The Panthers' declining rush game

Once upon a time, the Panthers were one of the best rush-based teams in the league. In 2021-22, that was Florida's signature style. The big question then was whether that style would be crushed in a playoff environment or if the Panthers needed more diversity in their attack.

Paul Maurice was hired in the 2022 offseason, and the rest is history. The Panthers built up a strong, grinding forecheck that has worn down opponents, helping them win their first Stanley Cup last June.

The team is elite at recovering dump-ins, wearing down its opponent along the boards, cycling the puck in the offensive zone and generating second-chance opportunities. But even as the Panthers evolved into more of a forechecking force, they still had some balance in their attack thanks to their play off the rush. It's just faded over the last couple of seasons — and that's especially obvious this year.

Via All Three Zones

The Panthers' change in strategy is evident on a team-wide and individual basis through tracking from All Three Zones. One of the biggest downticks is from Carter Verhaeghe, who tends to be one of the more reliable threats in transition around the league. He has only generated 5.67 shots per 60 off the rush this year, compared to last year's 10.7. Evan Rodrigues and Matthew Tkachuk have also taken noticeable steps back, along with Sam Bennett. That may be a contributing factor behind the dips in each of their five-on-five scoring rates from last year.

Howling for Wolf in the Calder Trophy race

High-scoring first-year players tend to draw more attention in the rookie race. Macklin Celebrini, Lane Hutson and Matvei Michkov are bound to earn many votes this spring. But Dustin Wolf is also making a strong case to finish in the top three.

Similar to the Hart Trophy race, the challenge of the Calder is measuring players of each position against each other. Comparing forwards and defensemen is challenging enough, but a goaltender? That's all the more complicated.

With Wolf, it's easier to measure him up against the top goalies in the league. And so far this season, he stacks up to some of the league's best. Heading into Thursday night, Wolf ranked sixth in the league with 18.7 goals saved above expected, behind only Daccord, Lukas Dostal, Igor Shesterkin, Thompson and Connor Hellebuyck. With 20 quality starts in 28 appearances, he has given the Flames a chance to win most nights, which is a major reason why Calgary is in the playoff picture. That seems more than worthy of top honors as a rookie of the year.

January Stars

Leon Draisaitl is doing everything and more this season in Edmonton. He is scoring goals at a career-high rate to lead the league, driving the Oilers' second line, winning puck battles to generate dangerous chances and has been a shutdown presence defensively. Draisaitl shined in a star-studded matchup

against the Avalanche in January and stepped up against the Capitals and Canucks while Connor McDavid was suspended. All together this month, he scored nine goals and 20 points in 14 games while earning a 62 percent expected goal rate.

Speaking of team MVPs, there is Dylan Larkin. His impact is felt all over the ice. The Red Wings count on him to retrieve pucks and transition the puck up the ice. In the offensive zone, he is a skilled playmaker and a clutch goal-scorer. That scoring has helped the Red Wings earn pivotal points in a tight playoff race. Just take his performance against Montreal, when he scored two points and outright dominated his five-on-five minutes to earn a season-high 4.15 Game Score against a team competing for the same playoff seed. He capped off January with a strong game against Edmonton, where he scored the tying goal and the game-winner in the shootout.

Filip Forsberg made a strong case for the third star. So did Thompson, Wolf, Darcy Kuemper and Spencer Knight, who put up sparkling numbers over the last month. But Barzal, who has helped fuel the Islanders' 9-3 record in January, earned the honors.

Barzal's 11 points over his last 12 games may not stack up to the rest of the league, thanks to the Islanders' putrid power play. But he is excelling at five-on-five. Barzal is one of the best in the league at creating scoring chances in transition, which has helped the Islanders control play with a 58 percent expected goal rate in January and a 16-3 scoring edge with their star forward on the ice.

[The Athletic / Canada names Sidney Crosby captain for 4 Nations: Why he was the pick and notable omissions](#)

By Chris Johnston – January 31, 2025

Captain Canada is Captain Crosby.

In what was arguably the easiest decision team management and the coaching staff had to make ahead of next month's 4 Nations Face-Off, Team Canada officially named Sidney Crosby as its captain for the tournament on Thursday afternoon.

The man who scored the Golden Goal at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics previously wore his country's "C" at the past two best-on-best international events: The 2014 Sochi Games and 2016 World Cup of Hockey, both of which were won by Canada.

Not only is Crosby the NHL's longest-tenured captain — he's held that honor with the Pittsburgh Penguins for more than 17 years, and counting — but he's also among Canada's most decorated international hockey players of all-time.

The country is 45-5-0 in games when he's worn the sweater.

Crosby's resume includes two Olympic gold medals, a gold from the IIHF World Hockey Championship, a gold at the World Junior Championship and a World Cup title. He was also named MVP of the 2016 World Cup tournament.

So while Crosby may have ceded the unofficial title of "best player on the planet" to Connor McDavid in recent years, there was no serious discussion about anyone else taking the captaincy for the Feb. 12 to 20 tournament. McDavid, named an alternate captain along with Cale Makar, made sure of that.

“It should be Sid. It should be Sid for sure,” McDavid told reporters in October when asked about Canada’s captaincy decision. “That’s not even a question. It’s just how it should be. He’s Sidney Crosby and he’s been there so many times and he’s the guy. It’s not like I thought about it a lot, it’s just such a no-brainer.”

Why these picks?

There was nothing ceremonial or nostalgic about the Crosby choice.

At age 37, he’ll be the oldest participant in the 4 Nations Face-Off field, but he remains an incredibly impactful player with 55 points in 53 games for the Penguins on the season. That includes scoring the overtime winner in Utah on Wednesday night. Crosby’s current rate of production puts him on pace to become the first NHLer ever with 20 consecutive point-per-game campaigns, which would break a record he currently shares with Wayne Gretzky at 19.

Among active Canadian players, his 1,651 career points are nearly 500 more than anybody else. Steven Stamkos (1,170 points) is No. 2 on that list and he didn’t receive a 4 Nations invite.

McDavid owns the next-highest total among Crosby’s Canadian teammates with 1,048 career points — including 21 goals and 66 points in 44 games this season. He will likely take the mantle as the next Canadian captain once Crosby’s playing career is finished. McDavid is in his ninth season serving as Edmonton Oilers captain and won the Conn Smythe Trophy in a losing cause last spring after leading his team to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final.

Makar is the youngest member of the leadership group at age 26. He’s a former Conn Smythe winner himself — in 2022 when the Colorado Avalanche lifted the Cup — and he was the only defenseman included among Canada’s initial six roster selections in June.

He wears an “A” for the Avalanche and has drawn comparisons to Bobby Orr while compiling 392 points through 367 career NHL games. He’s likely to log the most minutes of any of the Canadian skaters at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Notable omissions

There’s no shortage of Canadian players who wear letters with their NHL teams, including present-day captains Brad Marchand of the Boston Bruins and Mark Stone of the Vegas Golden Knights.

Marchand was also included in Canada’s initial six roster invites.

Among the other team members who wear an alternate captain’s “A” in the NHL are Nathan MacKinnon (Colorado), Colton Parayko (St. Louis Blues), Josh Morrissey (Winnipeg Jets) and Travis Konecny (Philadelphia Flyers).

Alex Pietrangelo would also have drawn serious consideration to serve as one of Canada’s alternate captains due to his extensive international experience and Stanley Cup-winning pedigree, but he withdrew from the tournament last week because of an ailment.

The Athletic / Team USA names Auston Matthews captain for 4 Nations: Why he was the pick and notable omissions

By Michael Russo – January 31, 2025

Toronto Maple Leafs center Auston Matthews will captain Team USA for the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off, the NHL announced Thursday.

With an impressive list of leaders to choose from, including four NHL captains and 10 NHL alternate captains, the Florida Panthers' Matthew Tkachuk and Boston Bruins' Charlie McAvoy were chosen as assistants for the international tournament, which is being staged by the NHL and NHLPA.

Matthews, 27, led the NHL with 69 goals last season and won the Hart Trophy in 2021-22, when he scored 106 points in 73 games. The 2016 No. 1 draft pick also won the Calder Trophy in 2017 and has scored 388 goals and 687 points in 598 career games. That's more goals and points than any American player in the NHL since he debuted in 2016. He was named Maple Leafs captain in August and is one goal from tying Darryl Sittler for second in team history despite having played 246 fewer games than Sittler.

Matthews, who has been dealing with an upper-body injury for much of the season, met with United States general manager Bill Guerin on Wednesday morning in Toronto in advance of the Maple Leafs' game against the Minnesota Wild. Matthews told Guerin that unless he has a setback before the tournament, he is good to go.

The Arizona native had a relatively slow start this season with 11 goals in his first 24 games before missing nine games in November and another six from before Christmas until after New Year's.

He has scored in eight of 12 games since returning and has 20 goals in 36 games this season.

This will be the first time Matthews has represented the United States since the 2016 World Championships. He also played in the 2015 and 2016 World Junior Championship (winning a bronze medal in 2016) and won gold at the 2014 and 2015 Under-18 World Championships.

The 4 Nations Face-Off will run from Feb. 12 to Feb. 20 in Montreal and Boston. The U.S. faces Finland on Feb. 13 and Canada on Feb. 15 at the Bell Centre, then Sweden on Feb. 17 at TD Garden. The championship game is Feb. 20 at TD Garden.

Why these picks?

The full U.S. hockey ops group and coaching staff voted on captains, and while Tkachuk got a few votes coming off a 2024 Stanley Cup championship, all tallied Matthews was the landslide selection. Matthews is used to dealing with media attention as captain in Toronto and is widely considered the United States' best player.

There were a dozen good choices to be assistant captain, but the U.S. brass felt Tkachuk and McAvoy will do whatever it takes to win and be emotional leaders who drag teammates into the fight.

Tkachuk — the son of Guerin's longtime Team USA linemate, Keith Tkachuk — goes to the hard areas and can pile up points. McAvoy can contribute offensively, defensively and physically.

Tkachuk, 27, is a two-time 100-point scorer and has hit 40 goals twice. He is a point-per-game player this season with 47 points in 47 games. He was teammates with Matthews on the 2016 World Junior Championship team and at the 2015 Under-18 World Championships.

McAvoy, 27, represented Team USA at the 2017 and 2018 World Championships, as well as the 2016 and 2017 World Junior Championship.

In 499 games, McAvoy ranks eighth in Bruins history among defensemen with 297 points and a plus-146 rating and 10th with 58 goals.

Notable omissions

The U.S. roster includes four NHL captains (Matthews, Quinn Hughes, Dylan Larkin and Brady Tkachuk) and 10 NHL alternate captains (McAvoy, Matthew Tkachuk, Jack Eichel, Adam Fox, Jack Hughes, Chris Kreider, J.T. Miller, Brock Nelson, Jaccob Slavin and Zach Werenski).

If the United States opted to go with three assistant captains, as Finland and Sweden did, Eichel likely would have gotten the third A. He's become a two-way leader for the Vegas Golden Knights, and that was a big part of them winning the Stanley Cup in 2023.

[The Athletic / Team Sweden names Victor Hedman captain for 4 Nations: Why he was the pick and notable omissions](#)

By Fluto Shinzawa – January 31, 2025

Victor Hedman has been named Team Sweden's captain for the 4 Nations Face-Off. Sweden opens play on Feb. 12 against Canada.

The Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman has seven goals and 33 assists in 47 games this season. Hedman leads the Lightning with 23:27 average ice time per game. His 40 points place him No. 6 among NHL defensemen.

The Pittsburgh Penguins' Erik Karlsson, Edmonton Oilers' Mattias Ekholm and Toronto Maple Leafs' William Nylander were named alternate captains.

Why these picks?

Hedman was a no-discussion selection. The Lightning did not hesitate to name Hedman their 11th captain in team history following the offseason departure of Steven Stamkos to the Nashville Predators. Hedman is a two-time Stanley Cup champion.

The 34-year-old has appeared in 1,099 career games, most of any active Swede. Hedman, the 2018 Norris Trophy winner, has succeeded Nicklas Lidstrom as his country's most accomplished all-around defenseman. Lightning coach Jon Cooper uses Hedman in every situation, from power play to shutdown minutes.

Karlsson is second to Hedman with 1,055 career games. Karlsson leads all active Swedes with 849 points. Karlsson, a three-time Norris winner, is in his second season with the Penguins.

Ekholm is a veteran of 869 NHL games and helped the Oilers to the Stanley Cup Final last season. Nylander has 51 points in 51 games in 2024-25, on his way to a third straight point-per-game season.

The Athletic / Aleksander Barkov named Finland captain for 4 Nations: 'We're ready to challenge and we want to win'

By Arpon Basu – January 31, 2025

Aleksander Barkov will captain Team Finland in the 4 Nations Face-Off, the NHL announced Thursday.

Barkov, captain of the Florida Panthers, became the first Finnish captain to raise the Stanley Cup last season, is the only NHL captain on the Team Finland roster and is one of just eight Finns to ever captain an NHL team.

Barkov was on Team Finland the last time NHL players were involved in a best-on-best format at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey, and he's eager to make amends for the country's performance in that event.

"World Cup, it was a great tournament. I know it didn't go well for Team Finland, we didn't win any games there, but it was a great experience for sure playing against the best players in the world. It was fun playing against them," Barkov said Thursday. "But I think we have a great team now, a great Team Finland, so we're ready to challenge and we want to win. That's our goal."

There was really no possible debate around the selection of Barkov as captain.

Barkov leads all active Finnish players in career points with 753 in 779 NHL games and last week passed Olli Jokinen (750 career points in 1,231 games) to move into fourth all-time behind Teemu Selanne (1,457 points), Jari Kurri (1,398) and Saku Koivu (832).

But he is far from a legacy player. Barkov is a two-time Selke Trophy winner who has taken the torch from Patrice Bergeron as the preeminent two-way center in the NHL, someone who embodies the hard-to-play-against, defensively responsible identity Finland plays with in any international tournament.

"He'll make sure to shut it down," Finnish forward Patrik Laine said recently. "He's one of those guys, shuts it down, no offense, just straight defense."

Laine is close friends with Barkov, two Tampere natives who train together and live close by in the offseason, and when told we would be sure to get those comments out there, he made sure to qualify them.

"Make sure it's clear it was a joke," he said. "I was laughing when I said it!"

Because, of course, Barkov is not just a defensive stopper. He is dynamic and a load to handle down low in the offensive zone. With 42 points in 42 games this season, he is one of only three players on Team Finland averaging at least a point per game, along with new Carolina Hurricanes teammates Mikko Rantanen and Sebastian Aho.

When considering his historic legacy as a Finnish player and his current status as a top player in the NHL, choosing Barkov as captain for Team Finland could not have been an easier decision.

"I just want to be myself. I don't want to be anything else," Barkov said. "I don't want to try to be anything else — just try and lead by example on and off the ice. That's who I am and who I am trying to be."

The NHL also announced Aho, Rantanen and Mikael Granlund of the San Jose Sharks will be Team Finland's assistant captains for the tournament.

“Granlund has been captain of Team Finland and the national teams before and led them to two world championships,” Barkov said. “Those guys are natural leaders. They lead their own teams. They lead by example. They lead by their work ethic.”

[Sportsnet.ca / Revisiting some of the biggest NHL trades in the salary cap era](#)

By Ally Chesham – January 31, 2025

What started out as a relatively quiet Friday night in the NHL last week quickly turned into anything but.

It began with social media buzzing over reports that Taylor Hall was being traded from the Chicago Blackhawks to the Carolina Hurricanes — a notable move but hardly a blockbuster. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the real bomb dropped: Colorado Avalanche star Mikko Rantanen was also reportedly heading to Carolina.

As everyone frantically refreshed feeds for the latest updates, insiders scrambled to piece together the details. Eventually, a three-team trade involving the Blackhawks, Hurricanes and Avalanche was revealed. Carolina landed Rantanen and Hall; Colorado received Martin Necas, Jack Drury, a 2025 second-round pick and a 2026 fourth-round pick; and Chicago picked up a 2025 third-round pick while retaining 50 per cent of Rantanen's salary.

Now that's a blockbuster.

It's safe to say the deal caught nearly everyone off guard — including its centrepiece. Following his debut with his new team, Rantanen told reporters he was shocked and hadn't seen it coming. A day later, the 28-year-old pending UFA told The Athletic's Peter Baugh he had been "willing to take a significant discount" on a contract extension to stay with Colorado, the team that drafted him 10th overall in 2015 and with whom he won a Stanley Cup in 2022.

Given all the factors involved, the trade sparked discussions about whether it could be the biggest in the salary cap era. First and foremost, Rantanen is a bona fide star — with two 100-plus-point seasons and ranking sixth in league points at the time of the trade (64 in 49 games), his credentials speak for themselves. Then there's the package he commanded which included Necas, who was tied for 11th leaguwide in points with 55 in 49 games at the time.

The shock factor adds another layer, from the timing of the trade to the fact that Rantanen had been with the Avalanche for 10 seasons and was expected to remain there for the foreseeable future. Lastly, and crucially, two of the teams involved are contenders, with the Hurricanes currently sitting second in the Metropolitan and the Avalanche occupying the first wild-card spot in the West. The addition of Rantanen should significantly impact the Hurricanes' season, including their division title and Stanley Cup aspirations, as well as their long-term success if they re-sign him.

The deal undoubtedly ranks near the top of the salary-cap era rankings, but recency bias may play a role in that perception. Let's take a trip down memory lane and revisit some other blockbuster contenders potentially worthy of that distinction.

Full deal: The Vegas Golden Knights acquired Eichel and a 2023 third-round pick (Mathieu Cataford) from the Buffalo Sabres in exchange for Alex Tuch, Peyton Krebs, a top-10 protected 2022 first-round pick (Noah Östlund) and a 2023 second-round pick (Riley Heidt).

The Jack Eichel saga dominated headlines for months, stemming from a deteriorating relationship between him and the Buffalo Sabres. At the heart of the dispute was how to treat a herniated disc in his neck — Eichel wanted artificial disc replacement surgery, a procedure never before performed on an NHL player, while the Sabres insisted on disc fusion.

Following the 2020-21 season, Eichel publicly revealed the rift and questioned his future in Buffalo. When training camp for the following season opened, he failed his physical and was stripped of his

captaincy. Less than two months later, the centre was traded to Vegas and underwent his desired surgery a week later.

Eichel made his Golden Knights debut 10 months after the procedure, in February 2022. It took time for him to return to form, as he recorded just 25 points in 34 games that season. He bounced back in 2022-23, producing at nearly a point-per-game pace before leading the Golden Knights to their first-ever Stanley Cup in just their sixth NHL season, tallying 26 points in 22 playoff games.

Vegas has remained a contender since, currently sitting second in the Pacific, while Eichel has continued to solidify himself as an impact player with 64 points in 50 games. Buffalo, on the other hand, was a struggling team before the trade and still remains one. It's set to miss the playoffs again this year, extending its drought since 2010-11. As for the Sabres' trade haul: Tuch has become a key piece, Krebs has produced at a bottom-six rate and Östlund is currently developing in the AHL.

P.K. Subban for Shea Weber

Date: June 29, 2016

When this swap of defencemen took place between two teams that had drafted and developed their respective players, the entire league was stunned. The Canadiens fanbase had mixed reactions, especially given that Subban was a fan favourite and a former Norris Trophy winner. The deal was made just two days before the 27-year-old's no-trade clause was set to take effect. Meanwhile Weber was 30 and known for his physical style, which led to concerns about his future durability and whether his best hockey was behind him.

Both players had successful campaigns in the first season following the trade, leading their teams to the post-season. The Predators reached the Stanley Cup Final, ultimately falling to the Pittsburgh Penguins. The following season, Weber suffered a broken toe requiring surgery, causing him to be shut down for the rest of the year. The Canadiens missed the playoffs, while Subban had another strong year with Nashville, playing all 82 regular-season games and recording 59 points, plus nine more in 13 playoff games.

In 2018-19, Subban struggled, and the Predators experienced an early post-season exit. Weber, still recovering from surgery, missed part of the season, but he continued to perform well in his return for the Canadiens despite the team missing the playoffs for a second consecutive year. In June 2019, Subban was dealt to the New Jersey Devils, which, for many, answered the question of who won the initial trade. Weber, meanwhile, remained a Canadien and enjoyed a Cinderella run during the 2020-21 COVID-impacted season, making it to the Stanley Cup Final before losing to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"In the bigger picture, I wish Shea had never been traded. I'm being very honest with you when I say that," former Predators general manager David Poile said on Nashville's Robby & Rexrode radio show last year.

Joe Thornton

Date: Nov. 30, 2005

Full deal: The San Jose Sharks acquired Thornton from the Boston Bruins in exchange for Brad Stuart, Wayne Primeau and Marco Sturm.

This deal earns significant consideration as one of the biggest trades in the salary cap era. Nearly 20 years ago, the Bruins traded their captain to the Sharks in a move that would have lasting impacts on both franchises. San Jose was already a strong team, having had made the playoffs in seven of eight

seasons after Patrick Marleau was drafted second overall in 1997 — right after Thornton — and reaching the conference finals for the first time in 2003-04.

But the Sharks reached new heights with Jumbo Joe. Thornton was an instant success, recording 92 points in 58 games with San Jose after having already accumulated 33 points with the Bruins before the trade. He went on to win both the Art Ross Trophy and the Hart Memorial Trophy that year. Over the course of his career with the Sharks, Thornton played 1,104 games and recorded 1,055 points. The Sharks led the NHL in points from the day he joined until his final game in 2019-20, reaching the conference finals four times and advancing to the Stanley Cup Final in 2016.

Former Sharks general manager Doug Wilson explained how the trade came together in an interview with The Athletic's Corey Masisak two years ago.

"Their GM was a good friend of mine, Mike O'Connell. We had played together in Chicago... I was talking to a lot of different teams because we weren't playing very well and something was needed... when Joe's name was mentioned, I said, 'OK, what are you looking for?'... It was one of those deals when a player like that is available, you go full speed ahead."

The return for Thornton didn't pan out as well for Boston, aside from Marco Sturm, who played 302 games over five seasons, recording a respectable 193 points. It may have seemed like a losing trade for the Bruins, but some argue it was the catalyst for their 2011 Stanley Cup win. O'Connell was fired four months after the trade, and his eventual replacement, Peter Chiarelli, hired Claude Julien as coach. With Thornton gone, Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci took on larger roles, and with the added cap space, Boston signed Zdeno Chara.

Jeff Carter

Date: June 23, 2011

Full deal: The Columbus Blue Jackets acquired Jeff Carter from the Philadelphia Flyers in exchange for Jakub Voracek, a 2011 first-round pick (Sean Couturier) and a 2011 third-round pick (Nick Cousins).

Carter spent six seasons in Philadelphia after being drafted 11th overall by the Flyers in 2003, recording 343 points in 461 regular-season games. During this span, the Flyers made the playoffs five times, with Carter contributing 21 points in 47 post-season games. In November 2010, he signed an 11-year, \$58 million contract extension with a limited no-trade clause to stay in Philadelphia — but before the deal took effect, the Flyers traded Carter to the Blue Jackets in a move he did not anticipate.

Carter's time with the Blue Jackets in the 2011-12 season was short and troubled. He struggled with injuries and reported attitude issues. After just 39 games, in which he recorded 25 points, Columbus shipped him to the Los Angeles Kings. It was a regrettable situation for Columbus; they had acquired Carter at a high price, only to sell him off low. Carter went on to win a Stanley Cup with the Kings that season and again in 2013-14.

The clear winner was the Flyers. They received three assets for a player who only played a fraction of a season with his new team. Philadelphia acquired a 22-year-old Voracek, who recorded 604 points in 727 regular-season games over 10 seasons before being traded back to the Blue Jackets in 2021. They also used their two 2011 draft picks to select Couturier and Cousins.

Couturier is still with the Flyers and serves as their captain. He has 522 points in 843 career games over 13 seasons with the team and is currently in the midst of an eight-year, \$62 million contract, ensuring he'll be with the Flyers for the foreseeable future. Cousins played with the Flyers until 2017 when he was traded to the Arizona Coyotes for a prospect and a 2018 fifth-round pick.

Full deal: The Florida Panthers acquired Tkachuk and a conditional 2025 fourth-round pick from the Calgary Flames in exchange for Jonathan Huberdeau, MacKenzie Weegar, Cole Schwindt and a lottery-protected 2025 first-round pick.

Tkachuk informed the Flames during the 2022 off-season he had no interest in signing a long-term deal with the team, prompting both sides to work to find a trade destination where he would commit to an extension. It was a significant blow for Calgary, which had already lost Johnny Gaudreau to the Columbus Blue Jackets in free agency. At the time of his trade request, Tkachuk was coming off a career-best 104-point season, and the Flames had just won a division title.

Over 431 games across seven seasons in Calgary, Tkachuk scored 382 points, ranking second in his draft class behind Auston Matthews. Once a deal was struck between the Flames and Panthers, Tkachuk immediately signed an eight-year, \$76 million contract extension. In his first season with the Panthers, the feisty winger registered 109 points in 79 games, adding 24 points in 20 playoff games as Florida reached the Stanley Cup Final, where it fell to the Vegas Golden Knights.

Tkachuk's offensive numbers dipped slightly the following season, with 88 points in 80 games. The Panthers again reached the Stanley Cup Final, this time winning their first championship in franchise history by defeating the Edmonton Oilers. Tkachuk contributed 22 points in 24 playoff contests.

Huberdeau, coming off a career-high 115-point season, was originally viewed as the biggest piece of the deal for Calgary. But since joining the Flames, he has yet to replicate that success, posting 55- and 62-point seasons in his first two full years. Weegar, meanwhile, has arguably emerged as the best part of the trade for Calgary, establishing himself as a top-tier blueliner and posting a career-best 52 points last season.

Schwindt, the prospect included in the deal, spent two seasons with the Flames' AHL affiliate and appeared in four NHL games in 2023-24. The Flames re-signed him to a one-year, two-way contract in September 2024, but he was claimed off waivers by the Golden Knights a month later. While then-Flames general manager Brad Treliving did well in salvaging a difficult situation and acquiring valuable assets, the Panthers are the clear winners of this trade to date.

Chris Pronger x 2

Dates: Aug. 2, 2005 and July 3, 2006

The Oilers made a bold move, landing Pronger in a three-for-one trade following the 2004-05 lockout — a game-changer for a small-market team that historically struggled to keep star players. The introduction of a salary cap created additional opportunities when big-market clubs like the Blues were forced to shed contracts.

Pronger was a coveted defenceman, having won the Hart and Norris in 2000 after posting 62 points in 79 games with the Blues. Edmonton quickly signed him to a five-year, \$31.25 million deal — one of the largest contracts in league history at the time. Pronger maintained his high level of play in his season with the Oilers, recording 56 points in 80 games. He was also a key figure in Edmonton Stanley Cup Final run, where it fell to the Carolina Hurricanes. His 21 points in 24 playoff games marked the best post-season of his career. Meanwhile, the Blues — reeling from Pronger's departure — missed the playoffs for the first time in 25 years.

Edmonton's hopes of building around Pronger quickly unravelled when he requested a trade that same summer, citing personal reasons. His departure had an immediate and lasting impact on the Oilers, who fell to sixth-last in the standings in 2006-07 and finished with the fewest goals in the league. It marked the beginning of a painful stretch where Edmonton missed the playoffs for 10 consecutive seasons.

While some considered the price Anaheim paid for Pronger risky, the future Hall of Famer made an immediate impact, helping the Ducks win the Stanley Cup in his first season. The return for the Oilers, who did their best in a tough situation, turned out to be hit-and-miss. The most notable pieces were Smid, a stay-at-home defenceman who played 474 games with Edmonton, and the 2008 first-round pick used to select Eberle, who recorded 382 points over seven seasons with the Oilers.

Honourable mentions: The Golden Knights acquiring Mark Stone (Feb. 2019); the Senators trading Erik Karlsson to the Sharks (Sept. 2018); the Sabres sending Ryan O'Reilly to the Blues (July 2018); the one-for-one swap of Taylor Hall for Adam Larsson (June 2016); the Panthers bringing back Roberto Luongo (March 2014); the Flames trading Jarome Iginla to the Penguins (March 2013); the Thrashers sending Ilya Kovalchuk to the Devils (Feb. 2010); the Penguins landing Marian Hossa (Feb. 2008); the Lightning moving Martin St. Louis to the Rangers (March 2015); and the Maple Leafs dealing Phil Kessel to the Penguins (July 2015).

ESPN / NHL execs on Mikko Rantanen trade, next deadline deals to come

By Greg Wyshynski – January 31, 2025

Mikko Rantanen has been a member of the Carolina Hurricanes for nearly a week, but it's going to take a bit longer than that for the shock to subside.

Carolina stunned the NHL on Friday night by acquiring Rantanen from the Colorado Avalanche in a three-way deal that also sent Chicago Blackhawks winger Taylor Hall to the Hurricanes. Colorado received winger Martin Necas, the Canes' leading scorer this season, center Jack Drury, a 2025 second-round pick and a 2026 fourth-rounder from Carolina.

Entering Wednesday night, Rantanen was tied for sixth in the NHL in scoring (65 points). Since the 2021-22 season, the 28-year-old winger was fifth with 365 points in 286 games, including back-to-back 100-point seasons.

The NHL simply does not see this level of offensive superstar traded within the regular season; nor does it see teams with designs on the Stanley Cup move on from foundational core players like Colorado did with Rantanen. But his contract demands as a pending unrestricted free agent, created a significant impasse with the Avalanche, with whom he had played for 10 seasons.

Rantanen told ESPN on Tuesday that he still hasn't reached out to all of his Avalanche teammates, whom he wanted to connect with. Both teams were right back in action in the aftermath of the trade, and Rantanen has been in a personal hurricane of reorienting his new life in Raleigh.

He knows players like Nathan MacKinnon have expressed their disappointment in seeing him traded. The feeling is mutual.

"I thought it was going to be an extension for sure. I can't lie about that," Rantanen said. "It was surprising because there was still some time to the deadline. I totally understand they didn't want to lose me for free. But it surprised me for sure. I didn't expect it at all."

Nor did the rest of the NHL, which is still processing one of the biggest blockbusters of the past decade. We spoke with several NHL executives, agents and players to get a sense of the trade's magnitude and the fallout that could impact more than just the teams involved.

Is this the right gamble for Carolina?

The Hurricanes were in New York when the Rantanen trade went down, with a game against the Islanders on the following evening. The players were at dinner when the news broke about Hall and then Rantanen. The tone and tenor of the meal quickly changed.

"We didn't know who was going the other way. We all tried to figure out who it was," center Jesperi Kotkaniemi said.

Kotkaniemi started getting texts from Finnish friends. "They're really pumped in Finland. They're able to watch the two best players now on the same team. So what could be better for them?" he said of Rantanen and center Sebastian Aho.

But then something else happened on social media: It was erroneously reported that Kotkaniemi would be sent to the Avalanche in the Rantanen trade.

On the surface, it made sense: He's a 24-year-old forward signed through 2029-30 at a reasonable cap hit (\$4.82 million annually), but he was never part of the package for Rantanen. Still, his name was out

there long enough for another wave of text messages to roll in about his own future, which made the situation a bit more intense for him.

"It was a very hectic 15 minutes there," he said.

It's been a hectic few weeks for Eric Tulsky, in his first season as Hurricanes general manager. The league was buzzing about Carolina being active in the trade market. Sources told ESPN that the Hurricanes and Vancouver Canucks had engaged in negotiations about forwards Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller. The players' longstanding feud had finally reached a boiling point, and Vancouver was seeking to ship one or both of them out before the March 7 trade deadline.

Kotkaniemi and forward Jack Roslovic were discussed in the framework of a Miller trade. Necas wasn't on the table for Miller, but might have been part of a deal for Pettersson.

Meanwhile, Carolina was also engaged in talks with the Avalanche for Rantanen, ones that tracked back to last summer.

Tulsky said last week that there was a desire for all parties to "get their best offers on the table" so the Hurricanes could decide which player to pursue. "Everybody had multiple offers. It was sort of time for everyone to figure out what they wanted to do, and this deal got done," he said. "It was a complicated dance."

When the music stopped, Rantanen and Hall were members of the Hurricanes.

The Avalanche picked up Necas, Drury and the two draft picks. Chicago acquired its own 2025 third-rounder from Carolina for Hall, the rights to Swedish forward Nils Juntorp and 50% retention of Rantanen's \$9.25 million salary cap hit. The Hurricanes ended up with Hall, a former Hart Trophy winner, and Rantanen.

"Obviously, Carolina has been coveting a superstar, and this is the way to get one," one agent said.

NHL executives were impressed with the boldness of the swing from Carolina.

"Good for them. Risk and reward," a general manager said. "They're giving up controllable assets for someone that you're not sure you can control. But they have the cap space to sign him. He's a great player who makes them a better team."

The executives we spoke with downplayed the notion that the Hurricanes might have started an "arms race" in the Eastern Conference among contenders. One general manager said that most teams have their own plans in mind for the NHL trade deadline, and those plans won't be torn up because a rival made a blockbuster trade.

There were virtues to all three players the Hurricanes were considering. Miller and Pettersson were both signed with lengthy term. Miller seemed cut from a Rod Brind'Amour mold as a great two-way player who's difficult to play against. (Depending on who you believe, he's also a bit difficult to play with as a teammate.) Pettersson has been underwhelming this season but has incredible upside as an offensive star. In 2022-23, he had 103 points in 80 games for Vancouver.

But Rantanen's combination of size, skill and offensive consistency was too much for the Hurricanes to pass up. Especially when one considers his playoff success: Since 2019-20, Rantanen is fifth in postseason scoring, with 28 goals and 83 points in 63 games.

Carolina has made the playoffs for six straight seasons, each time not producing enough offense to advance past the conference finals. In that span, the Hurricanes have a .486 winning percentage in one-goal games.

The downside to acquiring Rantanen, potentially: They currently don't know whether he'll be one-and-done in Raleigh, a superstar rental for a team that has yet to play for the Stanley Cup with Brind'Amour as their coach.

"Carolina will look stupid if they lose in the first round and he walks away to another team," an agent said. "But I think they're going to sign him. I think he'll like it there."

Did Colorado make the right call?

Nathan MacKinnon was already in a mood after the Avalanche lost to the Boston Bruins on Saturday.

"I wish I could have talked about this not right now," he said.

But this was the first opportunity for the media to ask Colorado's star center about losing Rantanen, his linemate and close friend.

"Just sad, obviously. Losing Mikko ... really great friend for 10 years. Won a Cup together. I don't really know what happened," he said. "It's just unfortunate losing a great friend and a great teammate."

Rantanen was seeking a contract in the neighborhood of the eight-year extension Leon Draisaitl signed with the Edmonton Oilers in September. That deal carries an average annual value of \$14 million. Both Rantanen and Draisaitl are represented by agent Andy Scott.

The winger has said he was willing to take less than market value to remain in Colorado, but it's unclear what that number actually looked like.

MacKinnon tried to stay out of Rantanen's business on a new contract. The ticking clock didn't bother him. He assumed it would play out much like Gabriel Landeskog's negotiations with the team did back in 2021, when the latter signed an eight-year, \$56 million extension hours before free agency. But MacKinnon was wrong.

"I never thought in a million years he'd leave. It just sucks," he said.

But Rantanen's departure was something the Avalanche and GM Chris MacFarland believed was a possibility. The Avalanche and Hurricanes had been discussing Rantanen since last summer. Tulskey said the teams tabled "serious offers" for the winger during the past six to eight weeks. The Hurricanes were pushing hard to complete the trade in the past two weeks.

Others around the league knew it was a possibility too.

"I wasn't surprised. For me, it wasn't a secret," a GM said. "The potential was there because of their situation -- that he can't go over MacKinnon [in AAV] or whatever. And I know that Carolina wasn't the only team they were speaking with about Rantanen."

MacKinnon makes \$12.6 million against the salary cap on a deal that runs through 2030-31. Before signing that deal in September 2022, he talked about taking less than market value -- on a contract that made him the highest-paid player in the league at the time -- in order to "win with the group." It's the same mindset exhibited by Penguins star Sidney Crosby, MacKinnon's friend and mentor.

But the contract that really influenced the Rantanen deal was one that hasn't been signed yet: Cale Makar's next deal, which will begin in 2027-28. Considered by some to be the best offensive defenseman since Bobby Orr, Makar could earn the largest NHL contract ever for a defenseman.

"I think they made a decision that you can have two players but not three players making more than \$12 million per season," an agent said. "They knew, ballpark, the number for Cale Makar. So their decision was, 'We can have two, but not three. Who do we keep?'"

So MacFarland had a choice to make: Top-load his roster with three star players gobbling up a large percentage of the salary cap or break up their holy hockey trinity. MacFarland made it clear that in doing the latter, he was acknowledging the team didn't have championship depth and needed the flexibility to get it back.

"It's clear we are not deep enough. I think that you've got to be deep to go four rounds, and hopefully this is going to help that," MacFarland said. "Obviously Mikko is a superstar. You can't replace that. But he's a superstar that earned the right to be a free agent."

One agent was skeptical of the negotiation: "I don't feel they ever really were interested in signing him."

Another agent felt the Avalanche did what they had to do. "It was the right trade for Colorado, because they couldn't afford to pay Rantanen what he wanted within the context of their salary structure. He didn't have full trade protection, so good move by them to trade him," they said.

MacFarland called it "a tough business decision" for the team. "It hurts, right. He's a homegrown talent. He's a superstar person. He's a superstar human being," he said.

Of course, there are other "business decisions" to think about in Denver (or any other NHL market).

"There's an argument to be made that keeping Rantanen makes sense because you're selling tickets. It doesn't really matter ultimately if you win the Cup, but you have to be good every year. That guy is going to allow you to make the playoffs every year," another general manager said. "But I could also make the argument that winning the Cup trumps everything else, and that winning it buys you a few seasons of a steady revenue stream no matter what your success is in those seasons."

MacFarland has made it clear that teams usually have to draft and develop players like Rantanen.

"We're going to have to try and replace him in the aggregate; 50-goal scorers don't grow on trees," he said.

But what if he could be replaced?

"You could make the argument that Rantanen is a unicorn, and that you're not finding another player like that," a general manager said. "That said, what's your opportunity cost? Could you find another 100-point winger like that? What could you trade to find that?"

One agent believes the Avalanche could find that player because of MacKinnon.

"Something no one seems to be discussing: I think the Avalanche believe that MacKinnon was a big part of Rantanen's success, and that they would be able to put another guy with MacKinnon, pay him less and have comparable success," they said.

Right now that player is Necas, who was immediately placed with MacKinnon after the trade. The speedy winger, who had 16 goals and 39 assists in 49 games with the Canes (as well as four assists in his first three games with the Avs), has another year left on his contract (for \$6.5 million).

MacFarland said it was important to have Necas and Drury, an "emerging player" down the lineup, under contract and "cost-controlled" beyond this season. He said the trade would allow the Avalanche to potentially make more moves before the March 7 deadline. Many sources are wondering if the Avalanche would target a center to play behind MacKinnon, with players like the Islanders' Brock Nelson in the conversation.

"I think we're always sort of looking to get better. Certainly, over the next few weeks that won't change. I think obviously there are a little more bullets in the draft-pick cupboard and some cap space," MacFarland said.

But no Mikko Rantanen any longer.

What is Chicago doing?

The Blackhawks' role in the Rantanen trade had observers around the NHL baffled.

"What the f--- is Chicago doing?" one NHL executive asked.

The Blackhawks retained half of Rantanen's salary and cap hit, while also trading Hall to the Hurricanes. For that, they received their own 2025 third-round draft pick that Carolina had acquired from Chicago at the 2024 draft.

In recent trades, a third-party team retaining 25% of a player's salary to facilitate a transaction has typically received a fourth-round pick. Chicago retaining that much cap space (\$4.625 million) for 50% of a player's salary and including a veteran forward with Hall's abilities in a deal for only one third-round pick in return left many criticizing the return for the Blackhawks. But NHL insiders acknowledge there may have been some method to Chicago's perceived madness.

One aspect of the trade that hasn't gotten a lot of attention is the actual salaries for Rantanen and Hall this season. Rantanen's contract has a declining real-dollar value to where he was making only \$6 million this season after having a base salary of \$12 million in the first two years of the deal. Hall made \$5.25 million this season. As one general manager noted, from a base salary perspective, the Blackhawks are paying slightly more for the rest of Rantanen's contract than they would have if Hall finished the season with them.

"Essentially, Chicago was asked to sell a little cap space with the money being the same. They get a third for Hall -- which to me is a little low -- but effectively that's what they're doing," one general manager said.

Davidson said that trading Hall was the logical move now because things frankly weren't going to get better for him in Chicago leading up to the trade deadline. "You run the risk of things like injury, the role was diminishing almost by the game, and it just wasn't heading towards a way that was going to maximize or enhance value," he said.

As one NHL agent put it: "I know Kyle Davidson's taking a lot of heat, but I don't think he probably was going to get much better for Taylor Hall than what he got."

There's no question it hasn't been the happiest season for Hall in Chicago. Former head coach Luke Richardson surprised him by making him a healthy scratch earlier this season. He had nine goals in 46 games. One NHL executive suggested that moving Hall out now could benefit the vibes inside Chicago's dressing room.

But moving him out now also means not having to use Chicago's last salary retention spot to move him later, which Davidson undoubtedly would have had to do to make a trade work at the deadline. Now that slot is available for another deadline trade involving a player like forward Ryan Donato (\$2 million AAV) or defenseman Alec Martinez (\$4 million AAV), both of whom are unrestricted free agents after the season; or a more coveted player in forward Jason Dickinson, who has two years left at \$4.25 million in AAV.

Will Carolina sign Rantanen?

The Hurricanes now have the chance to do something no other team can do for Rantanen this offseason: Give him an eight-year contract. Per the NHL collective bargaining agreement, everyone else can only go as high as seven years.

"Where is he going to go for seven years instead of the eight that Carolina can give him? If they're willing to go eight years and \$13 million annually, where else would he want to go that's good that can afford him?" one agent pondered.

Rantanen told me that the Hurricanes' ability to give him an eighth year will be a factor in his eventual free agency decision. But those negotiations are a ways off. He's got other things to think about now.

"To be honest, I haven't had any chance to think about an extension, just trying to get into the group and try to play well," he said. "So I think we'll have to think about those situations in a couple weeks or so."

What has been interesting in chatting with sources about Rantanen and the Hurricanes is that the money doesn't seem to be a concern. Owner Tom Dundon is infamous for his tough negotiations on contracts for everyone from players to his own coaches. But the assumption is that the Hurricanes had a ballpark idea of what Rantanen is looking for on his next contract and were comfortable going there in negotiations.

Obviously, the Hurricanes faced a similar situation when they traded for Pittsburgh Penguins winger Jake Guentzel at the deadline last season and attempted to sign him to an extension, only to see the Tampa Bay Lightning ink him instead.

But Tulsy said the conditions are more favorable to keep Rantanen than they were for retaining Guentzel. Last season, the Hurricanes didn't have the cap flexibility to sign Guentzel and the other players they wanted. This offseason, Tulsy estimates the team could have between \$35 million to \$40 million in cap space.

"Our team situation is totally different right now," he said. "We don't feel nearly as constrained."

So if it's not the money and it's not the percentage of the salary cap, what is the make-or-break thing for Rantanen staying with the Hurricanes?

"I think they will ultimately sign him, unless he absolutely hates it there," one agent concluded.

Tulsy admitted that the Hurricanes' current approach to Rantanen is "more of a recruiting pitch than a negotiation in my mind." They have to sell him on the franchise, the system, the players on the roster and on the way and, most of all, spending the next eight years of his life in Raleigh.

Sebastian Aho has not affixed "Ambassador" to his name, but it might as well be there. He's been a friend and Finnish national team teammate for Rantanen throughout their lives. Aho has starred with Carolina since 2016-17. No one on the Hurricanes is better equipped to sell Rantanen on Raleigh and the franchise.

"I guess it's just about making him feel comfortable, making him feel welcome. I think that goes a long way," Aho said. "But obviously if he wants to go play a round of golf, I'm not saying no to that."

What if Rantanen goes to market?

There isn't yet certainty on the NHL's salary cap in the near term. Some projections have it jumping from \$88 million to upwards of \$97 million next season. From there, the sky's the limit.

One agent said that as the salary cap rises, some teams will claim they have an internal cap that only allows them to offer so much money to players. But after one or two huge contracts are handed out that elevate teams to the new ceiling, that dogma will go out the window.

"Competitiveness is going to kick in. GMs and owners are going to decide that they need to spend more to stay competitive," the agent said.

The opportunity has never been greater for a player like Rantanen to maximize his earning potential on the open market. Leon Draisaitl's contract with the Oilers was \$112 million over eight years, or \$14 million AAV.

"I think he'll get Draisaitl-like money as a UFA," one agent predicted.

"There are probably some good teams that might be willing to go seven years at \$14 million annually to get him," another said.

Draisaitl's contract is one factor, but there's another winger potentially going to market this summer seeking a big contract: Mitch Marner of the Toronto Maple Leafs, who is in the last year of a six-year contract with a \$10.903 million AAV.

As far as possible suitors, two of the NHL's richest franchises come to mind:

The New York Rangers continue to aggressively try to reshape their roster. They nearly completed a trade for Miller with the Canucks in recent weeks, with center Filip Chytil as the centerpiece. But salary retention and draft pick conditions were reported sticking points. If they're able to create the necessary space -- moving out a veteran like Chris Kreider or Mika Zibanejad -- Rantanen is the kind of shiny new toy the franchise finds hard to resist. Consider also that winger Artemi Panarin will be in the last year of his contract in 2025-26 at an \$11,642,857 AAV.

The other team is already paying part of Rantanen's salary: The Chicago Blackhawks. They're expected to be in on every player they can this offseason in an attempt to quickly build a contender around young star Connor Bedard. The 19-year-old phenom has shown some discontent at dwelling in the Central Division cellar in the first two seasons of his NHL career. Putting a top five scorer like Rantanen on his wing would certainly put a smile on his face. Needless to say, Chicago has the money and the cap space to attempt it -- if not the competitive team that Rantanen might be compelled to join.

Then there's a wild card suggested recently by insider Andy Strickland, who is the rinkside reporter for the St. Louis Blues on FanDuel Sports Network. On his "Cam & Strick" podcast, Strickland said Rantanen will sign with the Edmonton Oilers this summer.

"They're going to be able to pay him and I think there would be some interest from him," he said, noting that Draisaitl and Rantanen share an agent. Strickland said the acquisition of Rantanen would also be an enticement for star Connor McDavid to re-sign, as he becomes an unrestricted free agent in summer 2026.

The magnitude of this trade, and the star quality of the player, lend themselves to this kind of speculation. The Hurricanes have some advantages in seeking to keep Rantanen. But they won't be alone if he tests the market.

"Assuming he doesn't hate the system and the environment there, I think he signs with Carolina," one agent said. "If he doesn't care where he plays, all bets are off."

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Looking at each team's smallest players](#)

By Ryan Dixon – January 31, 2025

A generation ago, it felt like the best hope a short guy had of thriving in the NHL was in the crease. Today, the dynamic has largely flipped; if you're under 6-feet tall, you might be able to challenge for a major trophy as a skater, but don't even dream of donning that goalie equipment.

February — the shortest month of the year — begins on Saturday, which is reason enough in this corner to look around the league and highlight the performance of some vertically-challenged players.

To be sure, hockey has never required its heroes be behemoths. Wayne Gretzky played at 6-foot; Steve Yzerman and Joe Sakic were captains of classic 1990s teams and played at 5-foot-10 and 5-foot-11, respectively.

Still, when 5-foot-8 Martin St. Louis won the 2004 MVP and scoring title, it felt like he'd landed from outer space to show us something different was possible on a sheet of ice.

The shifting size conversation gets far more pronounced if you focus on defenceman. Sure, 5-foot-10 Phil Housley was feathering passes all over the ice in the 1990s, but the idea of building your defence corps around a player that size was out of the question.

Today, blue-liners like 5-foot-10 Quinn Hughes, 5-foot-11 Adam Fox and 6-foot Cale Makar are league-defining players who win Norris Trophies and sometimes thrust themselves into Hart Trophy talk. Lane Hutson, a 5-foot-9 rookie, is not only a Calder candidate, but has 26 points since Dec. 1. The only D-men in the NHL who have more in that stretch are Hughes (31) and Zach Werenski (30).

Flipping it around, the '90s were littered with small goalies who made an enormous impact. John Vanbiesbrouck, listed at 5-foot-8, led the Panthers to the 1996 Stanley Cup Final; his former batterymate, 5-foot-11 Mike Richter, was the backbone of a 1994 Rangers team that won the Cup and 1996 American squad that won the World Cup of Hockey; 5-foot-9 Mike Vernon won the 1997 Conn Smythe Trophy for the Red Wings, who claimed the Cup again the next year with 5-foot-10 Chris Osgood. 5-foot-11 Curtis Joseph stole multiple playoff series for multiple teams and even dominant forces like Ed Belfour (six-foot) and Dominik Hasek (6-foot-1) had, more or less, everyday statures.

In 2025, the only sub-6-foot goalie in the entire league is 5-foot-11 Juuse Saros in Nashville. At 6-foot-4, Darren Puppa seemed like a padded, southpaw freak of nature in the '90s; now, it feels like every team in the league has a 6-foot-5 goalie somewhere in the system.

All that is to say, height conversations remain part of hockey in one form or another. And, for this edition of the power rankings, we're giving shine to every team's short guys.

1. Washington Capitals (34-11-5) Andrew Mangiapane, a pending-UFA, is likely a one-and-done with the Caps. The 5-foot-10 winger is a valued bottom-sixer, though, netting 10 goals so far and playing over 13 minutes per night.

2. Winnipeg Jets (35-14-3) It sure feels like a lot is riding on the shoulders of 5-foot-11 Cole Perfetti. The ups and downs are still there in his third full NHL season, but if he can become a reliable producer on the second line it will be a huge boon to Winnipeg's short- and long-term fortunes.

3. Edmonton Oilers (32-15-3) Two small wingers — 5-foot-10 Viktor Arvidsson and 5-foot-11 Jeff Skinner — have been disappointments in their first seasons as Oilers.

- 4. Dallas Stars (32-17-1)** Meet the rare team with two 5-foot-8 players in its forward group. Winger Logan Stankoven entered the season with Calder Trophy buzz and while he's unlikely to be a finalist, there's no question the Stars hit a grand slam with their 2021 second-rounder. Meanwhile, first-year Star Colin Blackwell has been seeing over 10 minutes a game as a fourth-liner.
- 5. Carolina Hurricanes (31-16-4)** 5-foot-10 Seth Jarvis — who will suit up for Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off — is really firing lately with 10 goals in his past 16 outings. 5-foot-11 blue-liner Shayne Gostisbehere is producing at a nice 53-point clip in Year 1 of a three-year UFA pact.
- 6. Minnesota Wild (30-17-4)** There's likely not a team in the league that has as many small guys playing big roles as the Wild. 5-foot-8 Mats Zuccarello — 'The Hobbit' — has been one of the best tiny guys in the league for years now and found a whole new gear in his 30s with the Wild. Minny's captain is 5-foot-9 D-man Jared Spurgeon and 5-foot-9 centre Marco Rossi — the ninth-overall pick in 2020 — is having a breakout year. And, of course, injured star Kirill Kaprizov, who stands 5-foot-10, is one of the premier offensive skaters in the NHL when healthy.
- 7. Florida Panthers (30-19-3)** Given their identify as a team that physically punished you, it's not surprising the Cats are a big squad. The only guys under six-foot playing meaningful roles on this team are two 5-foot-11 wingers, Evan Rodrigues and Mackie Samoskevich.
- 8. Vegas Golden Knights (31-15-5)** First-year Knight Victor Olofsson has missed some time, but the 5-foot-11 winger is scoring at a 30-goal pace in 30 outings.
- 9. Toronto Maple Leafs (30-19-2)** It sure feels like 5-foot-9 Nick Robertson could wind up on a new club before the trade deadline. 5-foot-10 Max Domi is having a fairly miserable three-goal season in the first year of a four-year contract. Meanwhile, two six-foot guys — Mitch Marner and William Nylander — are among the most lethal offensive players in the league.
- 10. New Jersey Devils (29-18-6)** It does feel like there's a question hanging over this club in terms of its long-term playoff potential with a forward group that skews small. Two of Jersey's killers up front are 5-foot-10 winger Jesper Bratt and 5-foot-11 centre Jack Hughes. (I guess, at 6-foot-2, Luke Hughes snagged the length in that family.)
- 11. Los Angeles Kings (26-16-6)** Young 5-foot-10 blue-liner Jordan Spence has been playing over 17 minutes per night for the Kings. That might change a bit with fellow righty Drew Doughty back in the lineup, but Spence has shown he's a keeper.
- 12. Colorado Avalanche (29-21-2)** 5-foot-10 defenceman Samuel Girard is playing more than 21 minutes a night on Colorado's second pair. Meanwhile, 5-foot-11 winger Artturi Lehkonen is quietly scoring at a 43-goal pace in 40 contests this season.
- 13. Ottawa Senators (26-20-4)** 37-year-old Claude Giroux could still register close to 60 points this season. The 5-foot-11 winger has had a fantastic career.
- 14. Tampa Bay Lightning (26-20-3)** There's definitely a small-guy heritage in Tampa, the franchise that gave three short, undrafted guys — 5-foot-8 Martin St. Louis and Tyler Johnson, and 5-foot-9 Yann Gourde — a chance to shine and were repaid in kind. Today, 5-foot-11 Brayden Point and Jake Guentzel team with 6-foot Nikita Kucherov to drive the offence.
- 15. Calgary Flames (24-18-7)** Dustin Wolf, at 6-feet tall, is most definitely a small goalie for this era. He's also a small goalie who could wind up a Calder finalist and a backbone of the Flames for years to come.
- 16. Columbus Blue Jackets (24-19-7)** 5-foot-11 rookie defenceman Denton Mateychuk is one to watch in Ohio.

- 17. Boston Bruins (25-21-6)** Brad Marchand, at 5-foot-9, is a signature undersized guy of the 2000s. Where will the pending-UFA's final NHL chapter play out?
- 18. Detroit Red Wings (24-21-5)** Year 2 in Detroit is going better for 5-foot-8 winger Alex DeBrincat, who could push up to 40 goals this year with a strong finish. 5-foot-11 Patrick Kane has been a north star for small guys with big NHL dreams since he entered the league nearly 20 years ago.
- 19. Vancouver Canucks (23-17-10)** 5-foot-10 Quinn Hughes could be on the poster for what's possible with a smaller frame in the NHL today. He could be a significant Hart Trophy contender this season.
- 20. New York Islanders (22-20-7)** The Isles have two 5-foot-11 forwards — Casey Cizikas and Kyle Palmieri — who have always played much bigger than their frames.
- 21. New York Rangers (24-22-4)** It's kind of hilarious to say two 6-foot-1 goalies — Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick — form a small battery, but it's true. Only four puckstoppers in the league who've played at least 15 games this year are shorter than the Rangers duo.
- 22. Montreal Canadiens (24-21-5)** While the Habs have incorporated some size to the roster in the past couple years, this franchise continues to be defined by undersized players. Of course, it helps that 5-foot-9 Lane Hutson is having one of the best rookie seasons for a defenceman in recent memory and 5-foot-8 winger Cole Caufield is on pace for 41 goals. 5-foot-11 Nick Suzuki is a point-per-game centre who never gets pushed around and 5-foot-9 winger Brendan Gallagher is among the more inspirational small guys of the past decade.
- 23. Philadelphia Flyers (23-23-6)** 5-foot-10 Travis Konecny is elevating to a new tier this season, tracking a 90-point campaign.
- 24. Anaheim Ducks (21-23-6)** 5-foot-10 Olen Zellweger is a super-smart defenceman who should have a long, fruitful top-four career in Orange Country.
- 25. Utah Hockey Club (21-21-8)** 5-foot-10 Clayton Keller has evolved into one of the better point-producing wingers in all of hockey.
- 26. Pittsburgh Penguins (21-24-8)** Sidney Crosby is 5-foot-11, but because he's got tree trunks for legs, we've never really thought of him as small. Still, it's not like the guy had the physical advantage previous Penguins megastars Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr benefited from. At 6-feet tall, Erik Karlsson has done splendid offensive things from the back end in his career.
- 27. St. Louis Blues (23-24-4)** You've really defied the odds when you made the big time as a 5-foot-9 guy who was born in Wales and grew up in Australia. Well done, Nathan Walker.
- 28. Nashville Predators (18-24-7)** Jonathan Marchessault won the 2023 Conn Smythe Trophy with Vegas as a 5-foot-9 winger who came up big during the hardest time of year to do so.
- 29. Seattle Kraken (22-27-3)** 5-foot-9 Yannick Gourde will be a hot commodity on the trade market thanks to his winning pedigree with Tampa. Seattle actually has a few key undersized guys, from injured captain Jordan Eberle (5-foot-11) to 6-foot centre and 2022 fourth-overall pick Shane Wright to 6-foot defencemen Vince Dunn and Brandon Montour.
- 30. Buffalo Sabres (19-26-5)** It hasn't fully clicked yet for 5-foot-10 winger Zach Benson at the NHL level, but he's still just 19 and nobody questions his skill.
- 31. Chicago Blackhawks (16-29-5)** Sure, ideally you want your franchise centre to be 6-foot-2. Still, that's no reason to believe 5-foot-10 Connor Bedard won't eventually be a dominant force in the league. He's a strong kid navigating a tough NHL landscape with not much in the way of support on a bad team.

32. San Jose Sharks (15-32-6) Macklin Celebrini joked at the NHL Scouting Combine last June that he was disappointed not to make it to six-foot after clocking in at, to be precise, 5-foot-11-and-three-quarters. Lord knows the 18-year-old pivot is not coming up short in his freshman season with the Sharks.