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January 29-30, 2025

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The Athletic / Boone Jenner's return to Blue Jackets is in sight, and the timing couldn't be better

By Aaron Portzline – January 29, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets have been more tight-lipped than ever about injuries this season — not just in noting the specific injury, but in making public a timeline for return — but a lot was going on behind the scenes late last week.

By mid-week, the Blue Jackets knew veteran Sean Monahan's injured right wrist was not healing as quickly as they'd hoped and that the possibility of their No. 1 center returning by the end of this month was out of the question. He's now likely to return, if all goes well, by mid-to-late March.

That's another huge blow for a club that, despite all expectations, is hovering around a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

But about the same time that Monahan's bad news was hitting home, the Blue Jackets received good news concerning another veteran forward.

Captain Boone Jenner, who has been out all season after suffering a shoulder injury at the end of training camp, got a clean bill of health from doctors, allowing him to join the Blue Jackets last Saturday for a morning skate before they played the Los Angeles Kings.

Coach Dean Evason could tell Jenner was fired up, he said, because Jenner was chirping at goaltending coach Niklas Backstrom.

"Christmas morning," is how Jenner described being back on the ice with teammates. "It's definitely a big step in the process. It feels like it's been a long, long time, and it has."

Jenner will join the club for a full-blown practice on Tuesday and Wednesday in Nationwide Arena, but will likely be held out of full-contact drills as he works his way back into the lineup, general manager Don Waddell told The Athletic.

"To have his presence and his leadership ... and I mean that on the ice," Evason said. "He's been in there (the dressing room) the whole time. He's talking to guys, he's in our meetings, he's led in the way he's had to, and has remained a huge part of our hockey team."

There's a yin and yang aspect to all of this, of course.

Adam Fantilli has gained valuable experience and played well after ascending to the No. 1 line between Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko in Monahan's absence. Luca Del Bel Belluz, called up from AHL Cleveland the day after Monahan was hurt, has been productive and reliable in his first extended NHL look.

But the Blue Jackets miss Monahan, not only his impactful offensive play between Voronkov and Marchenko and on the power play but also his defensive awareness and his veteran leadership. Fantilli has made it clear he has tried to model Monahan's play and composure.

Jenner hopes to return on the other side of the mid-season break for the 4 Nations Face-Off, which should put his season debut on Feb. 22 vs. the Chicago Blackhawks. That means he'll miss the next six games, beginning with Thursday's game in Las Vegas.

In training camp, it appeared Evason had Jenner pegged to play on the wing after having spent the last several seasons at center. But with Monahan out, and with the Blue Jackets well-stocked with top-six wingers, it's expected Jenner will likely play center when he returns to the lineup, or soon after.

Since Monahan's absence, the Blue Jackets — already not a great faceoff team — have seen their success on draws plummet across the board. They are last in the league at even strength (43.1 percent) and on the power play (34.5 percent), and 25th (41.2 percent) on the penalty kill.

Since he joined the league in 2013-14, Jenner is 14th among active players with a 54.1 percent success rate. Not to mention he's scored 71 goals the last three seasons.

How badly does Jenner want to return?

On Saturday, after his morning skate, Jenner made it clear he would have rather broken his jaw again than gone through this recovery from shoulder surgery. Remember, Jenner's jaw was wired shut, he drank food through a straw, etc.

"Last year, with the jaw, that was a different kind of hard," Jenner said. "I'd take six weeks over the few months, for sure.

"It happens. For it to happen before our first game is hard, but what can you do? There's a lot of motivation to come back, so I'm sticking with it."

It appears Jenner will make it back to play a few games before the Blue Jackets host the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 in an NHL Stadium Series matchup in Ohio Stadium. That's been his goal since the day he lost an edge and slammed into a corner of the rink in the Blue Jackets' practice facility.

Two developments have made it easier — not easy, but easier — for him to watch from the sidelines.

First, the emergence of the Blue Jackets' cluster of young players, who have all started to bloom in their careers: Fantilli, Marchenko, Voronkov, Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger, Denton Mateychuk and others.

Second, the ascension of defenseman Zach Werenski, not just toward being one of the NHL's top defensemen but to being one of the Blue Jackets' leaders.

"The young guys have all taken that step this year," Jenner said. "That's huge for us. It takes a couple of years to find yourself in this league, and you've seen guys really find themselves and become the players they've envisioned.

"(Werenski) has been the backbone for us. He's gone through a lot (with injuries, too), and to see him playing like this ... he's an elite defenseman and we're lucky to have him."

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets not shying away from their playoff goal](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 29, 2025

With a win Jan. 4 vs. St. Louis, the Blue Jackets tied Ottawa for the final wild card spot in the Eastern Conference. Three days later, their first win in Pittsburgh in nearly a decade moved them into playoff position via a tiebreaker over the Penguins.

For a team that has been shut out of the postseason for the past four years, that could have felt like rarefied air, or at least a position that made the team nervous about the importance of its upcoming games. But the Blue Jackets' momentum hasn't dulled in the ensuing weeks, with Columbus posting a 6-2-1 record since the victory over the Penguins.

With 50 games now in the books, they're tied for the last wild card spot and firmly in the hunt for the team's first playoff appearance since 2019-20, and it's something they've embraced. It's also something they believe is within their grasp.

"All of us, we really want to get in the playoffs," goaltender Elvis Merzlikins said after Saturday night's 3-2 overtime win over Los Angeles. "I have really good faith and belief that we can really make it this year."

And, well, why not? The Blue Jackets have beaten some of the NHL's best teams this season, including wins against three of the four division leaders. They have a good mix of players performing at a star level, youngsters who have long been projected for stardom coming into their own, and veteran role players who have added leadership and experience. They've been one of the top scoring teams in the league all season and recently have seen the defense and goaltending improve, and they should get a boost from the returns of such veteran leaders as Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan down the stretch.

Add it all up and Columbus remains one of the hottest teams in the NHL. Since Dec. 19, the Blue Jackets are now tied for second in the NHL with 12 wins and tied for third with a .722 points percentage. They've outscored teams by an average margin of 3.44-2.83 in those 18 games, their power play is second in the NHL at 33.3 percent in that span, and they've allowed two or fewer goals in seven of the last nine contests.

NHL experts gave this team little chance at a postseason berth before the season, but from day one, the Blue Jackets believed this is where they'd be.

"We wanted to raise the bar," Zach Werenski said. "I think guys that have been here and been leaders on this team, it hasn't been good enough the last few years. We showed it early in the season how we have to play and that was our standard, and I feel like we've just gotten better and better. Now we have a new standard on how we have to play, and it's even higher.

"We know what we're capable of in here and if we play the right way what can happen. We still have a lot of games left, but if we play that way and play to that standard, there's going to be a lot of success."

As Werenski noted, the buy-in factor is palpable with the squad. You can tell just how close this CBJ team is by being around it, both on the ice and off of it. Head coach Dean Evason has spoken consistently about the connection in the room as well as the Blue Jackets' unselfish nature on the ice, with every player accepting their role and trying to execute it to the best of their ability.

Off the ice, a number of team bonding events through the year have helped bring the group together, and you often see large groups of players getting dinner and hanging out with one another on the road. In the words of Zach Aston-Reese, there are no cliques on the squad.

That's helped the Blue Jackets be one of the most resilient teams in the NHL, including five third-period comeback wins.

"I think you can see the makeup of our team and how much each individual cares," defenseman Dante Fabbro said. "When the going gets tough, I think a big part of our character right now as a team is we push back. It's really cool to see.

"I've been in the league for a little bit now, and it doesn't happen often when you get a feeling like this in a locker room. We know we have a lot of work ahead of us, and it's a long road to get to the playoffs, but there's a lot of belief in here for sure."

Columbus has 32 games remaining going into Thursday's contest at Vegas, including just six before a nearly two-week break for the 4-Nations Face Off in mid-February. After that comes the March 1 NHL Stadium Series game against Detroit, then a March 7 trade deadline in which first-year general manager Don Waddell will have to make some tough decisions. It's all capped by a frantic April push that will include 10 games in the last 17 days of the regular season.

"There's a lot of hockey left in front of us, but we definitely have that feeling that we have one goal in mind right now, and that's to get into the playoffs," Fabbro said. "It's great to see all of us pulling the same rope and making a push for that. The standings are extremely tight right now, so every game means a lot to us."

Ahh yes, the standings. After Monday night's games, there are eight teams between 52 and 56 points, with the Blue Jackets and Tampa Bay each tied with 55, one point behind Boston and Ottawa. Montreal (53 points), Detroit (53), the New York Rangers (52) and Philadelphia (52) are right behind, and it will take quite an effort to fend off all of those teams.

It's a heck of a lot better than not being in the mix, though.

"We don't really look at (the standings) as a team, but personally, I definitely look," Kent Johnson said. "It's fun to look at it now. I didn't look too much the last couple years. Definitely it's good, and guys talk about them a little bit. It's cool you can be in a spot where you're rooting against or for teams, but obviously it's very early for that. It's a nice spot to be in. We just want to keep going."

The Hockey News / Should The Blue Jackets Consider Taking A Run At Signing Mikko Rantanen?

By Jason Newland – January 29, 2025

Scott Laughlin, host of NHL Morning Skate on SiriusXM NHL Network Radio has been talking about the trade of Mikko Rantanen from the Colorado Avalanche to the Carolina Hurricanes a bunch lately, and rightfully so as the trade was huge news.

But yesterday morning Scott said he made a prediction a while ago that I had never heard before. As an avid show listener, I was disappointed that I hadn't heard the original comment.

Laughlin said that he had predicted that Rantanen, a UFA after this season, would either sign with the Anaheim Ducks or the Columbus Blue Jackets. That's right, your Columbus Blue Jackets.

My first thought was "Yeah right." But then I remembered just how much money GM Don Waddell is going to have to spend next season. The Anaheim Ducks are also going to have A LOT of money to spend.

With the cap going up to approx. \$97 million, Waddell is going to have the money to put together a championship roster, should he choose to, and adding a player like Mikko Rantanen would be an excellent start.

Rantanen is coming off two consecutive 100-point seasons and is on pace to eclipse 100 points once again. In 50 games this season, he has 64 points. He is up to 681 points in 620 career games. Rantanen would be the dynamic winger that Waddell needs to go along with Adam Fantilli, Sean Monahan, and Kirill Marchenko.

But how much would he cost? It's being reported that Rantanen was willing to give the Avs a "hometown discount," and was willing to take less than Nathan MacKinnon. "I was ready to take a significant discount for my market value," is what he told the Denver Post. I assume the Avs told him that he was not going to make more than MacKinnon, who makes \$12.6 million per season. That means he undoubtedly will be asking for upwards of \$14-15 million per season for any team not named the Colorado Avalanche. He currently makes \$9.25 million per season and probably deserves to be paid anything he asks, if we're being honest. He's that good. He believes he should make what Leon Draisaitl is making, which is \$14 million per season.

Would GM Don Waddell be willing to swing for the fences in his first real summer as GM? Last summer was focused on signing his own RFA's and shoring up spots on the roster. This summer will be a bit different though. Yes, he will need to sign Mathieu Olivier and Dmitri Voronkov, as well as a few others. But will he take advantage of all the money he's going to have to spend? That's the real question.

The summer of 2025 will be the start of something special if Waddell is allowed to spend the money he has in stock.

What's Next: The Blue Jackets have a four-day break and will travel to Vegas next Thursday to play the Golden Knights.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Should Claim Saad Off Waivers

By Spencer Lazary – January 29, 2025

Former Columbus Blue Jackets forward Brandon Saad has been placed on waivers by the St. Louis Blues.

The Blue Jackets should consider claiming Saad off waivers. Reuniting with him might be a smart move, especially after the Sean Monahan injury.

The Blue Jackets have the cap space to take on Saad's \$4.5 million cap hit for the remainder of this season and next.

Although he's had a tough season so far, he can still provide this very good Blue Jackets team with valuable experience.

Through 43 games this season, Saad has registered seven goals and nine assists for 16 points while averaging 14:36 of ice time.

As a two-time Stanley Cup champion with the Chicago Blackhawks, Saad would bring a winning mindset into the locker room.

Claiming him off waivers would also be ideal for the Blue Jackets since it wouldn't cost them anything beyond taking on his cap hit. They wouldn't have to give up a draft pick or a young roster player to acquire him.

Additionally, adding Saad, along with the eventual returns of Boone Jenner and Yegor Chinakhov to the lineup, could be just as impactful as making a trade deadline acquisition.

It could be a smart move for GM Don Waddell to at least consider putting in a claim for Saad.

What's Next: The Blue Jackets have a four-day break and will travel to Vegas next Thursday to play the Golden Knights.

The Hockey News / Predicting Ivan Provorov's Next Contract With Columbus

By Spencer Lazary – January 30, 2025

TSN's Pierre LeBrun has reported that Ivan Provorov and the Columbus Blue Jackets want to get an extension done.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has publicly stated that the organization hopes to keep Provorov long-term. But what could that deal look like?

Provorov's Contract Prediction: \$60M/8 years (\$7.5M AAV)

The Blue Jackets should offer Provorov an eight-year contract to help bring down the AAV. Since they have the ability to offer the full eight years, they should take advantage of it and secure him long-term.

If they can, the cap hit could come in around \$7.5 million per season, giving him a total of \$60 million.

At just 28 years old, Provorov would be 36 when the contract ends. If possible, Waddell would be wise to structure the deal to reduce trade protection in the final two seasons.

This way, if the team needs cap space to contend, they could find a team willing to take on his contract.

Regardless, locking up Provorov on an eight-year, \$60 million contract would send a strong message to the organization and pending free agents that Columbus is serious about competing and willing to spend money.

Given how this season has played out and the team being in the hunt for a playoff spot, Waddell will likely do everything he can to get a deal done. It doesn't seem like trading him is something they want to do, which gives Columbus an advantage in negotiating a long-term deal to keep him in Ohio for years to come.

It should be said that the fit between team and player has been nearly perfect. Provorov stepped into the lineup and made an impact right away. Aside from Zach Werenski, he is the second most important defenseman on their blue line.

That's why Waddell should push to lock him up for eight years at around \$60 million.

What's Next: The Blue Jackets have a four-day break and will travel to Vegas next Thursday to play the Golden Knights.

The Hockey News / Boone Jenner's Return to the Blue Jackets Lineup Inching Closer

By Spencer Lazary – January 30, 2025

According to Aaron Portzline of The Athletic, the Columbus Blue Jackets could see Boone Jenner return to the lineup sooner than expected.

Jenner has been out all season after suffering a shoulder injury at the end of training camp. He has since gotten the green light to join the team at practice, though he is still wearing a non-contact jersey.

Portzline points out:

"The Columbus Blue Jackets have been more tight-lipped than ever about injuries this season — not just in noting the specific injury, but in making public a timeline for return — but a lot was going on behind the scenes late last week."

This could indicate that the Blue Jackets won't make his return public until he is 100% ready to play.

Portzline was able to shed some light on when the Blue Jackets' captain could be back in action:

"Jenner hopes to return on the other side of the mid-season break for the 4 Nations Face-Off, which should put his season debut on Feb. 22 vs. the Chicago Blackhawks. That means he'll miss the next six games, beginning with Thursday's game in Las Vegas."

Although it seems far away, his return will be a major boost to the lineup—almost like acquiring a new player at the deadline.

Jenner will most likely start off replacing Sean Monahan before shifting to the wing, where he was practicing before his injury in camp.

What's Next: The Blue Jackets have a four-day break and will travel to Vegas next Thursday to play the Golden Knights.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins Growing as Leader in Locker Room

By Mark Scheig – January 29, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets remain in the thick of the playoff race in the Eastern Conference as the calendar is about ready to flip to February. Several individual performances are worth noting as to why the team is in the hunt.

But perhaps one of the biggest reasons why the Blue Jackets are right there is because they are getting more from their goaltending specifically Elvis Merzlikins.

Since the game that Merzlikins stopped every shot on goal from the Devils' Jack Hughes, he's 9-2-1 in those 12 starts. His season numbers are now to a point of respectability after a tough start.

Merzlikins' save percentage of .894 is just under the league average of .895 and his GAA is under 3.00. The progress he's made of late is just as important a factor as any in seeing why the Blue Jackets are hovering in the wildcard race.

But most importantly, Merzlikins is happy. After a tough last couple of seasons, he's been able to put the past behind him and focus on the task at hand. In the process, he's earning the respect of his teammates as a growing leader in the Blue Jackets' locker room.

Merzlikins spoke exclusively to the Hockey Writers on Tuesday after practice to reflect on his recent journey and why he's in a much better place now.

Shutting Out the Noise

Perhaps the biggest thing Merzlikins has done going into this season was shutting out all outside noise. In turn, this has helped free him mentally.

"I worked really hard. I had a great summer but it was more about I really don't care," Merzlikins said of the outside noise. "Right now when I play, I really don't care what's going on outside. I don't care about the noises, the talks, the other stuff. I really don't care. When I go out there, I just want to play my 60 minutes of National Hockey League where I am and give my best and do my best. If I get in early 3 goals, I don't care about it. I'm not gonna break. This is the NHL here. Things can turn around really quickly really fast. You can win the game in the last second. So everything can happen really quick and fast. It's just mentally, I feel free. I just wanna enjoy and play and have fun with the guys on the ice."

Merzlikins is having more fun this season around his teammates. To get to that point, he made it a priority in the offseason to let the past remain in the past. Along with hard work, he came into the 2024-25 season in a much better place.

Merzlikins remembered what he felt walking out of the locker room for the last time in the 2023-24 season. It was clear what he wanted to use the offseason for.

"I wanted just to get out of here which was a good thing for me mentally I think," Merzlikins said. "I went to the (Latvian) National team. I saw my old teammates and players with who I grew up with. We had amazing time in the World Championship. So it was kind of change of scenario, I would say, more like a different locker room, different guys, different energy. But then the offseason, I was more focusing on getting stronger where I where I felt I needed and try one more time because that was already two or three summers that you were thinking what went wrong during the season. This time was another

time where you were thinking, where you could do better, what you could do better, what are the things that you should change. That was the main focus of (the offseason.)”

Thanks to input from his wife Aleksandra, she’s helped him with how he approaches different things.

“She’s definitely the one who helps direct me on the right path and on the right way,” Merzlikins said.

“Obviously, she doesn’t really know how the locker room works. But she still tries to help and she sees things differently. Sometimes those different things help you. She’s been really close to me. All these bad seasons are in the past, and even now when it’s good, she’s still there for me and she’s with me and she cares. There was a lot, mental directions, a different way of how to approach things and it just helped.”

Evason’s Influence

Going into last offseason was full of unknowns for everyone on the Blue Jackets. GM Jarmo Kekalainen was fired midseason. The biggest story of the offseason was who would the new GM and head coach be.

First came Don Waddell. Then eventually came Dean Evason. What would the impact of these decisions be? Merzlikins knew right away that there was something different about Evason. All it took was the first conversation.

“I felt that from the very first time when I saw him, he’s going to be different. It’s going to be different,” Merzlikins said of Evason. “Everything is going to be different. You could see different energy from him. You can’t really mess around. He’s different and he’s an open coach. That’s the awesome thing. You can easily go talk, have a conversation with him and there will be no lies. There is sometimes people say something and then they do the opposite. Dean is great. He’s an awesome coach and I really love it and enjoy playing for him.”

Evason postgame Saturday night called out Merzlikins’ calm when talking about what is working recently. That calmness has spread to his teammates during games. No matter what’s going on in the game, there is a calmness up and down the bench.

Not only is Merzlikins excited to play for Evason, he’s excited to play for his teammates. He’s still also very excited about being a Blue Jacket.

There was some confusion last season about if a trade request was ever made. Despite the confusion, his excitement for the Blue Jackets never wavered.

“I’ve always been excited. This team had faith in me. They drafted me. They chose me. It’s become my second home. My kid was born here. We had really tough years. Right now, we are having this small, tiny success, I would say it’s awesome. It’s an awesome feeling. It’s unbelievable. It’s a great feeling because we were fighting for the past 2-3 years, and now things are finally going like we wish it and like we want it to. We worked hard. We literally all together changed with a lot of things here and we never give up. Right now still, we don’t want to slip this away. It’s really a good feeling. We just want to keep having this good feeling.”

Growing Leadership

Not only has Evason been impressed with what he’s seen from Merzlikins, his teammates have been too. That calmness referenced by Evason is a sign of growth as a leader of the team for Merzlikins.

This has caught the attention of Zach Werenski.

“He’s embraced really being a team guy,” Werenski said of Merzlikins. “He’s been awesome this year. He’s embraced that starting role he’s in right now playing every game. He’s battling every night. You’re seeing his skill set show this year. He’s won us a lot of games. He’s kept us in a lot of games. There’s a lot

of confidence right now. He's fun to be around. I've seen him take huge strides everywhere to be honest. It's been fun to see. We've had a lot of guys step up this year in leadership roles and he's definitely one of them for sure."

The Blue Jackets came into the 2024-25 season having to answer an important question. Who would be their number-one goaltender? At least so far, thanks to some key changes to the approach, Merzlikins is playing the part. He's now showing what he's capable of and what many thought he was capable of.

If he's able to maintain this level of play consistently, this could become one of the most important developments for the Blue Jackets' in a season already full of good ones.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Del Bel Belluz Making it Tough to Send Him to AHL

By William Espy – January 30, 2025

Luca Del Bel Belluz has not stopped exceeding expectations this season. At 21 years old, Del Bel Belluz is already becoming an impact player for the Columbus Blue Jackets after he had a dominant start to the campaign with the Cleveland Monsters of the American Hockey League.

Del Bel Belluz's Debut Full of Foreshadowing

Del Bel Belluz was selected 44th overall in the 2022 Draft, and there was excitement when he made his NHL debut last season, drawing into the lineup against the Carolina Hurricanes for the [season finale](#) on April 16. In front of a near-sellout crowd at Nationwide Arena, he immediately made his presence known, opening the scoring just 3:37 into the first period with a wrist shot off the rush.

This season, Del Bel Belluz got off to a very hot start with the Monsters. After leading the league in points, he was recalled by the Blue Jackets, who are making a push for the postseason. His season debut mimicked his NHL debut, scoring 3:29 into the second period when James van Riemsdyk found him in front of the net. His popularity has skyrocketed in Columbus over the past ten games, as he consistently finds the scoresheet with seven points in nine games. Based on his performances, he could force general manager Don Waddell and head coach Dean Evason's hands.

Del Bel Belluz Overtaking the Veterans

With a few centers on the shelf, including Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner, and Cole Sillinger, Del Bel Belluz has been elevated to the second-line center role. Despite the pressure on a player drafted two summers ago, he's fit like a glove and even earned time on the second power-play unit.

Evason could easily have sheltered the young forward and limited his time while waiting for a more seasoned player to return to the lineup. Instead of elevating Sean Kuraly or the recently returned Justin Danforth, Evason went all-in on Del Bel Belluz, and it's paying off.

Del Bel Belluz's Playoff History

While he has been phenomenal at keeping the Blue Jackets in their playoff hunt, Evason might want to be cautious with Del Bel Belluz's usage if they clinch a berth. In both the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) and the AHL, he's struggled in the playoffs. During his first playoffs with the Mississauga Steelheads of the OHL, he scored only four points in 10 games. With the Sarnia Sting the following season, he had a much stronger performance, putting up 15 points in 16 games.

Del Bel Belluz's playoff struggles returned last season with the Monsters, with 31 points in 58 games during the regular season and only 2 points in 9 postseason games. In that case, it might be wise for the Blues to opt for a veteran in the lineup if the team makes the postseason.

Ultimately, if Del Bel Belluz continues to play at this level for the rest of the regular season, it'll be impossible to justify taking him out of the lineup when the postseason comes around. However, it might be wise to give him more playoff experience in the AHL rather than forcing him into this high-pressure situation at the NHL level, assuming the Monsters clinch a berth, as well. Either way, any playoff experience will be beneficial to his development.

Del Bel Belluz has earned a long look at the NHL level, and if he keeps performing at this high level and continues to improve, he will become a dangerous offensive weapon sooner rather than later. Once

veterans start returning from injury, sending him back to the Monsters would be the easiest path, but it's starting to seem like that may be the wrong decision.

1st Ohio Battery / Another Key Stretch To Determine If The Columbus Blue Jackets Are Serious Playoff Contenders

By Ed Francis – January 30, 2025

Earlier this month, the Columbus Blue Jackets played seven straight games against teams below them in the NHL standings.

It was a key stretch. When it began, the Blue Jackets were on the outside of a mess of an Eastern Conference playoff race. Nine teams were within five points of the top wild card spot, with only one team (the Buffalo Sabres) truly on the outs.

Columbus was 17-17-6 heading into the crucial two-week period. In such a close race, it wasn't so much about "getting ahead" as much as it was about *not* falling behind. That was going to mean the Blue Jackets needed to win, in theory, at least four of the seven games, and ideally, winning five to get 10 of the 14 possible points.

Mission accomplished.

The Blue Jackets went 5-1-1, dropping the last two games in New York against the Rangers and Islanders but managing at least one point in the two-game skid.

Still, gaining 11 of the 14 possible points was a motivator for the franchise and the players. It was propelled by a six-game win streak, their longest of the decade. In other words, it reaffirmed what the belief in the locker room already was: that the Blue Jackets are a serious contender in the playoff race.

After winning two of three last week following the conclusion of the seven-game stretch, the Blue Jackets find themselves tied for the final wild card spot in the East. The Tampa Bay Lightning are the technical owners of the spot, with one fewer game played and thus a higher point percentage.

Just one point ahead of the Lightning and Blue Jackets are the Bruins, who have the first wild card spot. Even then, they're tied with the Ottawa Senators for third in the Atlantic Division.

The top three teams in each division are automatically in the playoffs.

The mess gets messier: just behind Columbus are five teams within four points, including one (the Islanders) on a five-game winning streak.

The only team that fell out of the race (at least for now) is the Pittsburgh Penguins. They've lost three straight, sit at 48 points, and have played more games than any of the teams above them who are on the outside looking in. Even so, it's never safe to truly count out a team with multiple future Hall-of-Famers.

And so here we go again: another burst of games that will continue to paint a picture of how the season will unfold.

This time, though, it's different.

Rather than facing teams near the bottom of the standings and all of them being relatively close to home, the Blue Jackets find themselves with a four-game road trip across all four time zones and two against teams who are bonafide Stanley Cup contenders.

Here's what Columbus has on the schedule leading into the Four Nations Face Off:

The six games before the break is a mix of winnable games, stretch wins, and total toss-ups.

Let's piece it together:

- Much their back-to-back last week in Toronto and Carolina, winning one of the two in Vegas and Dallas would be considered a victory.
- The Sabres always seem to be a weird game for the Blue Jackets. Over the last three seasons, they've scored nine, given up nine, won games they shouldn't have, and lost games they shouldn't have. Let's group that in with the set of Utah games and say that ideally, winning two of those three would be considered a positive.
- That's 3-2-0 heading into the final game before the break, a Saturday night home affair against the Rangers. Because .500 hockey won't be good enough to make the postseason, we'll call that a must-win.

That would put the Blue Jackets at eight out of 12 points, which would bump their season-end pace up to 92, from its current projection of 90.

Last season, the Washington Capitals got in over the Detroit Red Wings on a tiebreaker with both teams ending at 91 points. The season before that, it took 92 points to get in. Look for that to be about the same this year, though perhaps a few points higher.

Columbus is going to need to continue what they've been building in recent weeks, and they'll need all the confidence they can get heading into the two-week break for the Four Nations.

1st Ohio Battery / Luca Del Bel Belluz Is Making Quite A Name For Himself Since His NHL Call Up

By Dan Dukart – January 30, 2025

Life comes at you fast. Just ask Columbus Blue Jackets forward Luca Del Bel Belluz.

The 21-year-old was drafted in the 2nd round, 44th overall, in 2022. After finishing his OHL career, he joined the AHL Cleveland Monsters for 2023-24, where he started slowly but gained traction as the season went on. He was rewarded for his second-half with an NHL call-up for Game 82. He famously scored in his first NHL game on his first shot.

His first professional offseason must have gone well for the lanky forward, as he started this season on fire, being named an AHL All-Star while leading the league in points (17-20-37 in 34 games) at the time of his call-up to the NHL club on Jan 8.

Since then, he's posted an impressive 2-5-7 in nine games with the Blue Jackets, and his spot seems more secure by the day. Talk about a meteoric rise.

Del Bel Belluz is an uplifting story about making your own breaks. Drafted into the OHL at just 5'10", 149 lbs, he was known as a crafty, playmaking type. Today, he's listed at 6'1", 185 lbs, and is better known for his wicked shot and deceptive ability to win puck battles, endearing himself to the coaching staff. In just his second game with the team, Del Bel Belluz was entrusted with a late third-period shift on the road with the game on the line against the St. Louis Blues. That subtle maneuver by Dean Evason surely gave the young forward a vote of confidence, that he's thought of as a well-rounded player, not just an offensive force. The coaching staff has given Del Bel Belluz a completely blank canvas in terms of on-ice favorability. Per NaturalStatTrick, he has 31 offensive zone, 31 neutral zone, and 29 defensive zone faceoff shift starts (5v5).

Playing primarily alongside James Van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson as the club's 3C, Del Bel Belluz has adapted quickly to a faster but more structured NHL. He fits well on a line where he can be the secondary (or tertiary) option as a puck transporter and support option. The possession numbers have not favored Del Bel Belluz, but his 13:51 average TOI suggests that the coaching staff is willing to let him play through and learn the league as he goes. I'm not suggesting that he is solely responsible for it, but the club is 6-2-1 since his recall.

Watching Del Bel Belluz, a few items stand out. The first is that detractors of his game found that the combination of his league-average skating and his inability to get to the interior (dangerous) ice would mean his game would cap out in the AHL. After all, even a high-end shot is neutralized if it's coming from the outside, at least, in the NHL. But this year, Del Bel Belluz has managed to either a) improve his skating since last year or b) find new ways to get to the interior ice (or both), and I think it's still too early to say exactly which it is. But it's gotten better. Look no further than this goal by Zach Werenski, where Del Bel Belluz attacks the middle ice, draws defenders to him, and then craftfully dishes the puck to Werenski with speed.

The second item is his engagement in puck battles. Watch how he supports Van Riemsdyk after a turnover and chips the puck ahead to Johnson, who buries a quick shot for the goal.

Here's another one, where he supports Johnson, gets a stick on the pass, and then turns it into immediate offense.

This type of play has been a regular occurrence this year, and it's the difference between a solid AHL player and an NHL regular. It's also part of the identity that has allowed the Blue Jackets to become one of the highest-scoring teams in the NHL - by turning the puck over on the forecheck and turning plays into offensive chances.

Del Bel Belluz still hasn't been able to unleash his patented shot with much regularity. This is more a testament to the speed of the NHL than a knock on him. How many former Blue Jackets prospects who were known for their goal-scoring failed to materialize because of their one-dimensional game (Emil Bemstrom and Vitali Abramov come to mind as recent examples)?

With players like Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner, and Yegor Chinakhov out of the lineup, Del Bel Belluz has done well for himself to show the coaching staff that he can more than just 'hang' at the NHL level. This is his first real taste of NHL minutes, and the hope is that, even if he is eventually sent back to the AHL, it will have served him well in the long run. As it stands today, it's fair to say that the long-term outlook for Del Bel Belluz is significantly higher than it was even six months ago. He's an NHLer.

[CBS Sports / NHL Power Rankings: Blue Jackets defying odds as playoff picture becomes clearer](#)

By Austin Nivison – January 30, 2025

With more than half of the 2024-25 NHL season completed, the playoff race is taking shape, and the Columbus Blue Jackets have overcome unimaginable adversity to remain in the mix. The Blue Jackets are the best story in hockey, and they continue to defy the odds night after night.

Just weeks before opening night, the Blue Jackets lost star forward Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed in an accident while riding his bike in New Jersey. It was a devastating blow to Columbus off the ice, let alone on it.

No one could have blamed the Blue Jackets if they weren't at their best, but instead, the opposite has happened. Columbus has rallied around the Gaudreau brothers, and it has been far better than expected. Kirill Marchenko is a point-per-game stud, Zach Werenski is playing the best hockey of his career and Sean Monahan was on pace for a career year before his injury.

The Jackets still have a big mountain to climb to reach the playoffs, and their five-on-five profile isn't indicative of a true contender. Put simply, Columbus has been getting favorable bounces for much of the season. That probably explains why it has just an 18.2% shot at making the playoffs, per MoneyPuck.

The video player is currently playing an ad.

Then again, no team deserves those bounces more than the Blue Jackets, and they have been making the most of them.

With the scrappy Blue Jackets vying for a playoff berth, here are the updated NHL Power Rankings with each team's playoff chances, according to MoneyPuck.

The Athletic / Analyzing the East's Stanley Cup contenders: Signature strengths and fatal flaws

By Dom Luszczyszyn – January 29, 2025

Who are the league's absolute best teams? Great question, one that feels harder to answer than previous seasons.

Ask any hockey fan which five teams have the best shot at the Stanley Cup, and chances are you'll get many different answers. This year feels wide open, and that's because there is a large group of great teams, but not many teams truly separating themselves in either direction. Parity!

There's a reason for that. Every team in the seemingly large contender's circle has a unique reason they can win it all — a signature strength that sets them apart. But they also have a fatal flaw that could just as well be why it all comes crashing down. There are a plethora of reasons these teams are good or not good enough, but each team does seem to have a unique signifier compared to the other contenders — both good and bad.

The East has six teams with a chance to win the Stanley Cup north of 2.5 percent. These are each team's signature strengths and fatal flaws.

Carolina Hurricanes

Different year, same story: The Hurricanes are winning a lot of games thanks to their biggest star, Rod Brind'Amour. As usual, he's got his Hurricanes playing an aggressive style of forecheck-heavy hockey that keeps the Hurricanes in constant control, with or without the puck.

The Hurricanes dictate the pace of almost every game to the point it almost doesn't matter who's playing. Despite an offseason talent exodus, this is the third season in a row that the Hurricanes have had a shot attempt percentage at or above 60 percent. That mark has only been breached by one other team since 2007-08, the 2021 Avalanche.

It certainly helps that the Hurricanes are deep up front and on the backend, full of players able to execute the team's distinct style from top to bottom. Swapping Martin Necas for Mikko Rantanen should only add to that. But the fact that the Hurricanes can rotate players in and out and not miss a beat points squarely back to a system hellbent on puck possession. It's once again the Hurricanes' bread and butter — no team controls the game better.

For years, the Hurricanes have had the same fatal flaw: high-end talent. Well, all that changed last week with their blockbuster deal for Mikko Rantanen, rendering a lot of already written words useless. For a team that always leads the league in Corsi but never in actual goals, landing Rantanen is a big deal.

So what's the new flaw to nitpick for the Hurricanes? I guess it has to be goaltending. Rantanen may fix things on the finishing front, but making saves the other way is still of some concern for the Hurricanes.

Both Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov are good goalies who have performed admirably over the last two years. But neither option feels very safe, especially in comparison to the other goalies in the Metropolitan Division. Those goalies — Igor Shesterkin, Logan Thompson, Jacob Markstrom — feel like a warm blanket on a winter night. Carolina's goalies just don't offer the same reaction. With Andersen, it's a question of availability. With Kochetkov it's a question of reliability.

While both goalies get the job done better than you'd think, it's hard to feel extremely confident that one of them can lead a team to the Stanley Cup.

Carolina is good enough elsewhere that they might not have to. But if we're trying to envision a world where the Hurricanes don't go the distance, it's easy to see goaltending being the reason why.

Toronto Maple Leafs

This one is hilarious given the team and how little their supposed strength has done for them in the postseason. The Core Four era has led to just one playoff series win in six tries for the Leafs and in most of those series, the Core Four specifically have not been good enough. Strength? Pfft.

But that's exactly the point. The Core Four is Toronto's signature, a group of four elite forwards that very few teams can match. It's supposed to be what sets the Leafs apart, making up for flaws elsewhere. And in the regular season at least, that's been plain to see. Auston Matthews is a perennial Hart Trophy candidate, Mitch Marner and William Nylander are franchise wingers, and John Tavares has been a steady point-per-game presence. These four are the reason the Leafs win a lot of games and enter so many playoffs with high expectations.

A strength is only a strength if it comes through for you, though. These four, collectively, haven't. Will that change this year under new coach Craig Berube? It's difficult to say now, but it has to. In order for the Leafs to go the distance, what sets them apart in the regular season has to continue setting them apart in the playoffs. If the Core Four are just ordinarily great instead of a special kind of great, it sets the stage for the team's fatal flaw to take over.

Toronto's top four is solid, arguably the best it's looked in years. Maybe this time the defense by committee thing will work now that they have Chris Tanev in the fold. He's the shutdown force this team has desperately craved for years. And yet their bigger problem still exists: the Leafs do not have a true No. 1 defenseman. That's what separates them from the other top contenders in the league.

Almost every other contender has a lead dog on the back end. The Leafs have three No. 2s: an offensive one (Morgan Rielly, who hasn't looked the part this season), a defensive one (Tanev) and a two-way one (Jake McCabe). That's nice depth up top, sure, but compare that to other top teams and it feels like the team will once again be understaffed simply by not having The Guy.

The reason every trade deadline show starts with "the Leafs need a defenseman" is because they do — it's just not the kind of guy you can get at the deadline. With a truly elite No. 1, it's easier for things to fall into place. For the Leafs it's always been a challenge. Maybe things work better with a third No. 2 added to the mix. For now, it remains a question mark.

New Jersey Devils

Last year's Oilers scored 10.6 goals per 60 and earned 10.7 expected goals per 60 on the power play and rode that wave (among other waves) to the Stanley Cup Final. This year's Devils have that team beat in both categories: 11.1 goals per 60 and 11.8 expected goals per 60. The latter mark would be the highest ever in the analytics era.

All credit for that belongs to a blistering top unit featuring Jack Hughes, Nico Hischier, Jesper Bratt, Stefan Noesen and Dougie Hamilton — a unit that generates over 13.5 expected goals per 60. That would also be a record.

New Jersey's power play is lethal and it's the team's biggest weapon. That's no surprise given every player fits their specific role well, functioning together as a creative and cohesive unit.

It's not often that people point to a team's power play as a key to playoff success, but New Jersey's looks special at the moment. It helps to also be strong in other avenues, but it's the team's power play that sets the Devils apart.

For a team that's so dominant on the power play, it's baffling that they get so little at five-on-five. They certainly generate offense at a strong rate with 2.8 expected goals per 60, a top-five mark, but the team's execution has been downright abysmal. New Jersey has scored only 2.34 goals per 60 this year at five-on-five, a mark that ranks 21st.

That's putrid and it all comes down to finishing. When a team has more goals not scored above expected than the Hurricanes, something is wrong. New Jersey's minus-0.46 goals above expected at five-on-five is the second-worst mark in the league ahead of only the Predators.

Some of that may be bad luck, but it's also something that was an issue in each of the previous two seasons where the Devils scored 0.2 fewer goals than expected per 60 in each season. This year, Bratt is the only forward scoring over two points-per-60. The average contender has four.

It's not just the stars not delivering at five-on-five either. There are a lot of depth pieces beyond them doing cardio out there putting more pressure on the Devils top guys to deliver.

It's great having a power play that generates chances better than any other and has the results to show for it. But as the whistles start hiding in Games 5, 6 and 7, it'll be goals at five-on-five needed most. No contender is struggling to score those more than New Jersey.

Florida Panthers

There are only two forwards in the league with a projected Defensive Rating of plus-six or higher: Aleksander Barkov and Sam Reinhart. That duo is Florida's superpower, a pair that should share the Selke Trophy. Barkov and Reinhart are the epitome of Florida's current identity. Offense is great and they can generate it with the best of them, but defense comes first.

Other teams have great defensive forwards up front. Some have similarly dynamic forwards that play defense well. But Barkov and Reinhart are the league's strongest blend of both worlds. Beating them in a matchup is beyond frustrating because they can not only hang with the best offensively, they can absolutely shut them down the other way too.

Over the last two seasons, against top competition every night, the Panthers have given up just 1.67 goals against per 60 and 1.84 expected goals against per 60 with Barkov and Reinhart on the ice. That's an absurd number that speaks clearly to their defensive dominance. Barkov and Reinhart are the best in the world.

The best teams get defensive help from their forwards and offensive help from their defensemen. It's a total buy-in across the lineup built on capable support that makes them difficult to stop. Think of the last few Stanley Cup winners and that pattern is plain to see. Last year's Panthers, the Golden Knights, the Avalanche, the Lightning — they all had defensive support from the forwards and offensive support from the defensemen at above-average rates.

That brings us to this year's Panthers. There's no shortage of defensive buy-in up front, an obvious fact given what was just said about Barkov and Reinhart. But offensive support from the blue line has become a bit of a sore spot where the losses of Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson have been felt tremendously. While neither was perfect and the Panthers were right to not pay the price they commanded, it's clear now that there's a missing element on Florida's blue line. There's no one back there who can truly drive offense.

That effect has been felt on a power play that is creating 1.3 fewer expected goals against per 60 and as well at five-on-five with 0.1 fewer. In all situations, this year's Panthers have dropped to eighth in chances created, down from second last season. Without many meaningful changes up front, that

difference is likely a result of an offensive void on the back end. Without a true driver there, the Panthers' claws don't feel as sharp this season.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Between Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Jake Guentzel, Brandon Hagel and Anthony Cirelli, no team has a deeper group of high-end talent. Only one other team has four forwards above plus-10 in Net Rating and Cirelli, at plus-nine, almost makes it five. The average contender's fifth-best forward sits at plus-four. In terms of both quality and quantity, Tampa Bay may have the most firepower in the league.

We all knew Kucherov was one of the league's best players. We all knew Point was one of the league's most dangerous scorers. We all knew Guentzel would be a tremendous addition to that duo.

What sets the Lightning apart even further within this realm is the emergence of Hagel and Cirelli, one of the fiercest puck possession duos in the league. They dominate the puck at both ends of the ice, making life easier on the other stars defensively, while adding the necessary offense to ease the burden there too.

It's those two that are the major difference here. A few teams can match the Kucherov-Point-Guentzel triumvirate. None have a Hagel-Cirelli pair on top of that.

There's a catch that comes with Tampa Bay's incredible stable of top forwards: the rest. No team is more top-heavy than the Lightning, whose depth is arguably the league's most vulnerable. As amazing as the team's top five forwards are, the rest tend to give a lot back. The gulf in talent between the team's top and bottom forwards is stark.

The Lightning try to mitigate that with the sturdy Nick Paul on the third line, but he simply doesn't have a lot to work with. Maybe a system where the Lightning operate with two top lines and two fourth lines is the future. Coach Jon Cooper certainly uses them that way to minimize any damage the bottom six might cause. Still, it does put a lot of pressure over the final third of the game — the one where the team doesn't have Point's or Cirelli's line on the ice. Stopping both lines will be a tall task for any team, but the Lightning leave enough on the table to make it up elsewhere. It could be their downfall.

Washington Capitals

The power of spite is real. A collective chip on the shoulder can fuel a deep run to the Stanley Cup Final beyond a team's means — just ask the 2018 Golden Knights.

Not a single soul could've imagined the Capitals would be leading the entire league in points past the halfway point of the season, but here they are. It's hard not to believe that spite is the driving force. Think of all the players who were essentially given up on by previous teams and how they're doing this season.

The Blackhawks didn't think Dylan Strome was worth qualifying. The Kings were completely done with Pierre-Luc Dubois. The Senators lost faith in Jakob Chychrun. The Leafs didn't think Rasmus Sandin could be a top-four defenseman. The Golden Knights gave Logan Thompson away for almost nothing.

All of those players have been vital cogs to turning the Capitals around. Between those five players, Washington has solidified its top six centers, fortified its top four defensemen and on top of that have one of the league's best goalies.

Washington's biggest strength this season is its depth, powered by misfit players who have found a home. They've helped turn the Capitals into a powerhouse.

As good as those players have been and as good as the Capitals have been as a whole, there's a reason those players were previously abandoned. There's a reason no one expected the Capitals to even come

close to this level of play. There's a reason they still don't, with oddsmakers giving Washington the 11th-best Cup odds at the moment (we have them ninth). There's a reason that there isn't a single member of the team representing Canada, USA, Sweden, or Finland at the 4 Nations Face-off. It's all the same reason: A lack of belief that this incredible run from these particular players is legit.

It's that last point that's the biggest issue. Aside from Thompson, is there anyone else on the team who was a genuine 4 Nations snub? Probably not, and if so, there's no one who would be a top-of-the-lineup difference-maker in a best-on-best tournament. And that includes Alex Ovechkin who has slowed down since returning from injury.

A team can win without star power and the Capitals have the depth and goaltending to do so. But those stars on other contenders are the types of players that can will a series win from nothing. As good as some players have looked this season, Washington is still lacking the best of the best and it's what could put the Capitals behind in most matchups.

The Athletic / Analyzing the West's Stanley Cup contenders: Signature strengths and fatal flaws

By Dom Luszczyszyn – January 29, 2025

Who are the league's absolute best teams? Great question, one that feels harder to answer than previous seasons.

Ask any hockey fan which five teams have the best shot at the Stanley Cup, and chances are you'll get many different answers. This year feels wide open, and that's because there is a large group of great teams, but not many teams truly separating themselves in either direction. Parity!

There's a reason for that. Every team in the seemingly large contender's circle has a unique reason they can win it all — a signature strength that sets them apart. But they also have a fatal flaw that could just as well be why it all comes crashing down. There are a plethora of reasons these teams are good or not good enough, but each team does seem to have a unique signifier compared to the other contenders — both good and bad.

The West has six teams with a chance to win the Stanley Cup north of 2.5 percent (sorry Minnesota). These are each team's signature strengths and fatal flaws.

Edmonton Oilers

The Oilers are the Stanley Cup favorite and it's for the same reason that their odds have been so high over the past few seasons: they have the best player in the world and other teams do not.

The catch? This time that means Leon Draisaitl.

Look, the best player in the world is still Connor McDavid, there's no question about that. But this year? Draisaitl has been better. He's scoring more, he's carried the team when McDavid has been sidelined, and most importantly he's turned into a shutdown force. Draisaitl has been one of the league's most effective defensive forwards this season and it's completely unlocked his game to reach even higher heights.

Before this season there were still debates about Draisaitl's place in the league's hierarchy, partly due to his defensive ability. Now, there's no question. His plus-five Defensive Rating is one of the highest marks in the league and he's putting up career best on-ice numbers at five-on-five. He's been the complete package and leads the league with a Net Rating of plus-17.8. The next best player, McDavid, is at plus-14.7.

A one-two punch like that down the middle? Good luck everyone else. The duo's combined projected Net Rating is plus-59 which is 10 goals clear of the league's next best duo (Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar).

That's a foundation that's very difficult to beat and is exactly what fuels Edmonton's league-leading Cup odds. The Oilers are the team to beat for good reason. Draisaitl leveling up even further is a big part of it.

Despite being the current Stanley Cup favorites, a lot of people still don't quite believe in Edmonton to that degree. For good reason.

A lot of Edmonton's value is concentrated at the top of the lineup, leaving plenty of holes elsewhere. On balance, it works out great because the Oilers have the best top-end talent in the league, but it does

leave the team vulnerable otherwise. As great as the team's top end is, it unfortunately does not include their starting goalie — an issue other contenders in the West don't quite share.

Stuart Skinner is not a bad goalie, but he's certainly a frightening one. When he's on, he looks more than capable of being the steady presence necessary for the league's best team to take care of the rest. The bar for how good Skinner needs to be is not that high, either — and yet it's a bar he often struggles to reach. When Skinner is bad, he's bad. During those stretches, Skinner is more than capable of single-handedly losing a playoff series. That's the truth with a lot of goalies in this league outside the true upper echelon, but Skinner feels especially susceptible to the hot-cold roller coaster.

In Calvin Pickard, there's also no safety net beyond Skinner either. It's him or bust. For the league's best group of skaters, that thought is terrifying.

Winnipeg Jets

The Jets are a good team without Connor Hellebuyck in net. This season they've shown more substance in front of him than in the past with the league's best power play and solid work at five-on-five.

But if we're talking signature strength, the Jets are still defined by having the league's best goalie. Hellebuyck is Winnipeg's cheat code, giving the Jets a chance to win every single night and almost peerless in his consistency at that level. Every season, like clockwork, Hellebuyck is right at the top. That's hard to do for a goalie; Hellebuyck is built differently.

This season might be his best work yet. During the 2022-23 season, Hellebuyck saved 0.53 goals above expected per game and upped that to 0.66 last season. This year he's managed to up the ante further with 0.88 goals saved per game, which would be the best mark in the analytics era.

Somehow, the best got better. If Hellebuyck can channel that dominance in the playoffs, the Jets can go extremely deep.

Depending on goaltending as a signature strength in a playoff series is scary. Just ask these very Jets, who have been ousted in the first round in back-to-back seasons. Both series were lost in five games. Both series saw Hellebuyck uncharacteristically struggle, allowing 0.8 goals above expected per game.

No matter how great a goalie is, small-sample randomness can make him look ordinary. A great goalie can steal a series on his own, but it's imperative for the team in front of him to be good enough to not need to. In the last two playoffs, Winnipeg's skaters also weren't good enough.

That brings us to this season where the roster looks a lot better — clearly, considering they have the second-best odds in the West. The Jets are not just Hellebuyck and 18 guys.

Josh Morrissey is legitimately one of the best defensemen in the league. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor's stronger commitment to defense and elite power-play work has the duo looking like legit stars. Both Nikolaj Ehlers and Gabriel Vilardi have been stellar. Add some strong depth pieces to that and Winnipeg's skaters look well-positioned to make the most of another excellent Hellebuyck season.

The roster is good... but is it great enough? We're not trying to move goal posts here, but if we're talking fatal flaws, can the team's skaters stack up to the other contenders? Will Winnipeg's stars shine bright enough relative to the other superstars? Will the holes the team has (2C and the third pair) add further pressure to the stars? Despite improvement, those questions still persist.

Dallas Stars

Jason Robertson, Wyatt Johnston, Roope Hintz, Matt Duchene, Jamie Benn, Tyler Seguin, Mason Marchment and Logan Stankoven. In the words of colleague Pierre LeBrun — holy mama! That is a

loaded group of forwards, all eight of which grade out as top-six caliber. There isn't a team in the league that can match that.

It's not just that the Stars have a plethora of great forwards, it's also how well they all fit together, which creates some flexibility to mix-and-match. The Stars have speed, skill, snarl and size up front.

Dallas has no weak links in its forward corps, which is crucial come playoff time. Now the Stars need some of those players to step up and establish themselves as strong links capable of going toe-to-toe with the best of the West. Over the last 20 games, Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston are finally looking the part on that front after a slow start. Robertson has 10 goals and 26 points during that stretch while Johnston has 22 points.

If that duo can keep that up as they've shown they're fully capable of before, look out. Combine that with Duchene's dominant second line plus a loaded third line and the Stars will be attacking in very-difficult-to-stop waves.

Ilya Lyubushkin, Nils Lundkvist, Matt Dumba and Brendan Smith. Woof.

The Stars have three excellent defensemen in Miro Heiskanen, Thomas Harley and Esa Lindell with the first two being true No. 1 studs. That makes a life a lot easier for the forwards, but there's a sizeable gap between those three and the others filling out the rest of the lineup. The hole left in Chris Tanev's absence is massive.

The Stars are a bit vulnerable after their star-studded top three and have a massive need for one more top-four defenseman. As solid as Lyubushkin has been this season, he's still better served in a third-pair role. Pushing him down there would also offer some stability in an area where there's been trouble, as the other three options have looked rough. Any hope that Matt Dumba could regain his previous form as a top-four defenseman was abandoned almost immediately while both Lundkvist and Smith should probably only be trusted for spot duty as a No. 7.

When filling out a defense corps, it's all about trust. As trustworthy as the top half feels, the bottom half is a major issue and if not addressed could lead to the Stars' demise this season.

Los Angeles Kings

Once again, the Kings are one of the league's best defensive teams — and they're about to add to that with Drew Doughty returning to the lineup very soon.

Defense has been Los Angeles' calling card in the entire Kopitar-Doughty era, but over the last few years that strength has been bolstered further. Down the middle, the Kings have a 1-2-3 defensive punch that's the envy of the league with Anze Kopitar, Quinton Byfield and Phillip Danault. On the back end, Mikey Anderson and Vladislav Gavrikov formed one of the absolute best shutdown pairs in the league in Doughty's absence. With Doughty back, the Kings should have a formidable top four with an exceptional capacity to defend.

Defense is a team game for the Kings, but it's their anchors at key positions that create that advantage. No team can match Los Angeles' shutdown capability on three lines and two pairs and it's why the Kings currently have the league's best projected Defensive Rating at plus-29.

That makes life real easy for Darcy Kuemper, though it helps that he's bounced back greatly in Los Angeles. His 13 goals saved above expected ranks 11th in the league.

Come playoff time, the Kings will be extremely difficult to score on.

As great as all those players are defensively, they don't bring anywhere close to the same heat offensively. Kopitar is a great offensive forward still — just not compared to other first-line centers.

Same goes for Doughty and other No. 1 defensemen. Up front, Byfield and Danault are fine in that regard relative to their roles, but not world-beaters. On the back end, Anderson and Gavrikov are both below-average offensive players. That's fine, it's not their skill set, but it does leave the team wanting.

The Kings do have wingers that add offense, but again, they're lacking relative to other contenders. Adrian Kempe is a terrific offensive talent and Los Angeles' most important player in that regard. He alone is not enough, especially given he doesn't stack up favorably to the league's best wingers. It would help if Kevin Fiala could get back on a point-per-game track, but he's scoring at just a 51-point pace this season.

The Kings have depth, but they still lack the kind of game-breaking offensive stars that can take them to the next level. It's what's been apparent in three straight first-round losses to the Oilers and it could again be a problem this season. The league's best defensive team looks just average offensively — will that be enough?

Colorado Avalanche

Very few teams play their top line and top pair together as often as the Avalanche. When you have two of the best players in hockey, why not overwhelm the opposition? The ability for the Avalanche to throw Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar over the boards is a cheat code, one no other team can match because no other team has a top-two center to go with a top-two defenseman.

This season, MacKinnon and Makar have played 593 minutes together at five-on-five and in that time they've earned 62 percent of expected goals and 57 percent of actual goals. No surprise for such an elite combo — they've dominated the opposition, looking like the Harlem Globetrotters on many shifts.

It'll be interesting to see whether the duo can keep up their Globetrotter ways without Mikko Rantanen, though. The two key pieces remain intact and Martin Necas is pretty darn good offensively himself. He also has the speed to match MacKinnon and Makar which should make for a good fit. Still, it'll be something to watch in the second half as it does look like Colorado's signature strength has been weakened, lowering the team's Cup odds in the process.

As good as the Avalanche are when MacKinnon and Makar share the ice together, they have a massive problem otherwise.

The Avalanche still outscore their opponents when their superstar duo are apart (55 percent of actual goals), but get badly out-chanced (43 percent of expected goals). When both players are off they lose the scoring chance battle marginally (48 percent of expected goals) and have been outscored badly (41 percent of actual goals). Essentially, the Avalanche live and die by the minutes MacKinnon and Makar spend together where they look like the Harlem Globetrotters. Otherwise, it's Washington Generals time.

Depth is the biggest issue facing the Avalanche and it doesn't feel like getting Jack Drury on top of Martin Necas will solve that. The team has gone through injury troubles, Casey Mittelstadt hasn't worked out as expected and the rest of the supporting cast just hasn't cut it. The forwards have not been good enough.

What seems to get lost in the discussion when it comes to Colorado's depth, though, is that it's not just the forwards. The team's biggest issue might just be Samuel Girard and Josh Manson on the second pair as neither player has played up to that caliber this season. Together they've earned a 47 percent xG rate and just 40 percent of goals this season.

Why are the Avalanche not as good when MacKinnon and Makar are out there, but apart? It probably has something to do with MacKinnon playing with the other two pairs and Makar playing with the other three lines. If the Avalanche want to contend this season, the team's depth issues need to be addressed.

Vegas Golden Knights

It's difficult to know exactly how Vegas prefers to line up when healthy. Outside of the top line, the Golden Knights don't have a single other line that's played 150 or more minutes together. That's something no other contender can say where the average is at least three lines above that mark. Essentially, almost every other contender has line-to-line consistency — Vegas juggles.

There's good reason for that and that flexibility might be one of Vegas' key advantages. The reason Vegas is able to juggle is because the team has the deepest center group in the league. Jack Eichel, Tomas Hertl, William Karlsson and Nicolas Roy combine for the second-most center value behind Edmonton. All four are well above average for their roles with Karlsson and Roy being especially advantageous in the bottom six.

That Karlsson and Roy are too good for the bottom six means they need to find more minutes elsewhere and that's likely where some of the mixing and matching comes in. Having all these different looks to throw at your opponent is a nightmare for opposing scouts, and that all starts with a deep center core. It's arguably the most important position and Vegas is extremely well set in that department.

Fatal Flaw

Winger duds

As great as the centers are, there's another reason for all the mixing and matching — the team's wingers are still lacking.

It's nice that Mark Stone has been (mostly) healthy and looks like his vintage self again. It's nice that Ivan Barbashev looks great on the top line. It's nice that Pavel Dorofeyev has emerged as a genuine top-six forward. And it's also nice that Vegas has struck reclamation gold in Victor Olofsson. As a whole, the Golden Knights look a lot better on this front than many could've reasonably expected at the start of the season.

And yet it's hard to have that much faith in that top-six crew compared to what other contenders can boast. The bottom-six wingers don't really inspire either.

The Golden Knights are great where it matters: down the middle and on the back end with a rock-solid top four. But that group is doing a lot of the heavy lifting for a team that's still in need of capable winger support.

The Athletic / 'Are we live?' Chirps, laughs, old stories and Bruins legends star in NESN's alt-cast

By Fluto Shinzawa – January 30, 2025

WATERTOWN, Mass. — The four-page script for the Jan. 23 episode of NESN's "Unobstructed Views" says nothing about bashing David Krejci, one of that night's guests. That changes when host Andrew Raycroft, approximately an hour before the show starts, poses a question to colleagues and fellow ex-Boston Bruins Patrice Bergeron and Tuukka Rask inside the green room at NESN's Watertown studio.

"Have you seen Krech's commercial?"

In the spot — for Bluedrop Water, a water purification company in Easton — Krejci places a glass under an ice maker. The retired center, wearing a Bluedrop polo, raises the glass, looks at the camera and says dramatically, "That's some good ice."

Rask, Bergeron and Raycroft giggle as they watch the commercial. Raycroft proposes a pivot. During the second period of that night's Bruins-Ottawa Senators game, when Krejci joins the show remotely from his South Carolina home, his ex-teammates should ambush him with a clip and light him up.

"He's thinking he's just going to come in and have a nice, easy conversation," Rask says with a laugh. "And we're just going to hammer him right off the bat."

About 10 minutes into their chat, Raycroft mentions Krejci's acting career. Raycroft, Bergeron and Rask laugh. So does Krejci. Rask asks Krejci if he can install the system at his house. The chop-busting continues. Krejci good-naturedly repeats his four-word line.

Krejci, as his ex-teammates know best, gives as well as he takes. Rask asks Krejci if he knows he had good career production against the Senators.

"I had pretty good numbers against everyone, Tuukks," Krejci says with a smile, which triggers a round of laughter.

Krejci has a question of his own. He seems legitimately puzzled when he issues his query.

"So what do you guys do?" Krejci asks. "You guys just watch and do play-by-play?"

Alternative facts

"Unobstructed Views" runs once a month. It is NESN's version of the "ManningCast," ESPN's alternative broadcast of "Monday Night Football" featuring Eli and Peyton Manning.

Play-by-play announcer Judd Sirott and analyst Andy Brickley call the traditional version of a Bruins game on NESN. Simultaneously, in a broadcast airing on NESN Plus and NESN 360, Bergeron, Rask and Raycroft, wearing casual clothes, watch the same game off a monitor in Watertown and chat in a breezy manner. Occasionally, Raycroft turns to host Laura Stickells, whose duties include monitoring social media, to ask questions viewers have submitted.

For someone watching "Unobstructed Views," the game action occupies most of the screen. Instead of Sirott's and Brickley's audio, you hear Bergeron, Rask and Raycroft — they appear in iso-shots or a three-shot on the right side of the screen — speak during the game.

The show includes scripted segments. Before the game, Bergeron, Rask and Raycroft approach a whiteboard and predict their three stars. They are to place a magnet of their choice's face on the board. There is no magnet for Joonas Korpisalo, Rask's pick. Rask draws a stick figure and labels it "Korpi."

Tuukka Rask had to do his own illustrating for his player of the game. (Fluto Shinzawa / The Athletic)

Later, Stickells asks Bergeron to rank five Canadian players in order of greatness. Bergeron sticks Sidney Crosby, the first player Stickells mentions, in fourth place. Mario Lemieux gets top status.

But for the most part, it's Bergeron, Rask and Raycroft watching the game, offering their thoughts and stretching out their conversation.

"It's like sitting at a bar," says NESN chief operating officer Matt Volk, "listening to people have a conversation that you wish you could be a part of."

"Unobstructed Views" is meant to drive revenue. Coors Banquet and Jordan's Furniture sponsor the show.

It is also a marketing machine designed to promote the primary broadcast as well as other ventures. In the third period, NESN reporter Jahmai Webster and Golf Magazine director of social media Claire Rogers join the show to discuss TGL, the new golf league. Fenway Sports Group, NESN's parent company, owns Boston Common Golf, one of TGL's six teams.

The alt-cast allows NESN to serve a different audience, typically a younger one. A complementary channel like NESN Plus allows the provider to showcase ex-players' personalities and expand a traditional broadcast's boundaries. The alt-cast is better suited for storytelling, free of the pressure of describing what's happening in-game.

For example, Raycroft sees a first-period shot of Trent Frederic, in uniform against Ottawa after missing two previous games because of an illness. Raycroft asks Bergeron and Rask if they ever played sick. It tees up Rask to tell the story of how he was too sick to play in the Bruins' final 2015-16 regular-season game, also against the Senators. With Jonas Gustavsson in net, the Bruins lost 6-1 and missed the playoffs.

"It's a little bit less about what's going on on the ice in that very moment — not in a play-by-play way," Volk says. "Which opens up a different type of conversation that can appeal to many different audiences."

Rask describes how he was throwing up that day. But he leaves out the story's other layers.

Rask was so drained that when he skated out for warmups, he did not take a single shot. Earlier that week, he had been spotted at Duff's, one of his go-to neighborhood restaurants. Online and on sports radio, this exploded into how Rask had been pounding chicken wings and beer the night before the game.

Rask recalls all of this in the green room during first intermission. Sometimes the best stories don't get on the air.

Chirps all around

Rask is not above accepting abuse. In the green room, as the ex-Bruins joke about Krejci's commercial, Rask acknowledges he was in one too.

In a spot for The Long Drink, a Finnish alcoholic beverage, a shirtless Rask is sitting in a fake sauna. A woman lashes Rask's back with a bouquet of leaves. As she does, Rask turns to the camera and says, "Oh, so refreshing!"

Bergeron and Raycroft watch the commercial on a computer in disbelief.

"How bad is that?" Rask asks with a laugh.

This prompts Bergeron and Raycroft to recall their commercial in which they drive a Zamboni over the Zakim Bridge. The way Bergeron and Raycroft remember it, Joe Thornton and Nick Boynton were originally requested.

“It’s because Joe wouldn’t wake up to do it,” Raycroft says of why he and Bergeron were selected. “We were the only ones. We were the young kids.”

“They pitched it to Joe and Boynts,” Bergeron concurs. “They’re like, ‘Hahahaha! Bergy and Razor will do it.’”

Bergeron was 18 when the commercial first aired. Raycroft was 23. For the ex-goalie, a future television career was not even a consideration.

“Not in a million years. Not at all,” says Raycroft, now a regular NESN analyst, radio and TV guest and podcaster. “This was the last thing I thought I would ever do.”

Raycroft is now 44. Bergeron is 39. Rask is 37. As the NESN pregame show mentions Jake Sanderson, Ottawa’s 22-year-old defenseman, Rask wonders where time has gone.

“I’m like two years away from not knowing any of these guys,” Rask says.

“You’re also two years away from them not knowing who you are,” Bergeron fires back, prompting laughter all around.

“How old do you think (Alex) Ovechkin feels?” Rask then asks of the 39-year-old chasing Wayne Gretzky’s goal-scoring mark. “If he gets the (record) this year, he’s done. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gets it next year, he’s going to retire after that game.”

“That would be awesome,” Raycroft answers. “That would be perfect for Ovi. He’s got to be going so hard to get it done so he doesn’t have to train all summer.”

“I think if he needs one or two, he’s not even going to work out,” Rask says. “Power play, he’s just going to stand there and hammer one-timers until he gets it.”

This is the kind of chatter “Unobstructed Views” watchers enjoy, according to NESN feedback. But they also want Bergeron, Rask and Raycroft to discuss the game they’re watching. The latter is harder than it seems.

Bergeron retired in 2023. Rask said goodbye the year earlier. They still have former teammates in uniform. Rask is also a team ambassador. Neither is comfortable with critique, which the scuffling Bruins deserve.

“We still have some really good friends on the team,” Bergeron says. “You want them to do well. That’s the main thing. You hope for a good game. You want them to perform and hopefully get that win.”

As Bergeron, Rask and Raycroft watch that night’s game, their conversation feels stretched at times. They are not going to rip apart their ex-teammates. They occasionally go quiet as they follow the on-ice action.

Krejci’s second-period visit brings them to life.

Among other things, they discuss their performance in a December alumni game in which Krejci scored six first-period points. Krejci eased off afterward because of pain in his hips.

“We had to stand on the blue lines. Nobody told me. That was like 30 minutes long, all those guys getting introduced,” Krejci recalls of warmups, which he claims initiated his hip discomfort. “‘Bergy, 17-time Selke. Blah, blah, blah.’ Fifteen minutes was just about Bergy. Then my hips were done.”

Like his ex-teammates, Krejci is not comfortable commenting on this year's team. They ask him what he thinks. Krejci pauses, smiles, laughs awkwardly and says, "Are we live?"

The Athletic / How rare is it for No. 1 picks like Taylor Hall to play for this many teams?

By Sean McIndoe – January 30, 2025

Friday night's Mikko Rantanen blockbuster was such a monster trade that the inclusion of a Hart Trophy winner felt like a footnote. But there was Taylor Hall, heading to Carolina and his seventh NHL team.

That led to what I thought was an interesting question from a reader:

What's the record for most teams played for by a first-overall pick? Hall's gotta be getting close if he doesn't already have it, that's seven teams now

Spoiler alert: Hall isn't in a league of his own... at least, not yet. And you might be surprised how many No. 1 picks ended up building resumes worthy of a journeyman.

Let's go back to the start of the entry draft era in 1979 and see how many top picks can compete with Hall's growing jersey collection.

Zero stops

We'll start our journey with a question: Has anyone ever been the first pick in the entry draft without ever making it to the NHL at all?

The short answer is no. The longer answer is that it did happen three times in the first five years of the amateur draft, which is what the league had from 1963 to 1978. Back then, players who'd already signed with teams weren't eligible, so the pool was much thinner, and top picks Claude Gauthier (1964), Andre Veilleux (1965) and Rick Pagnutti (1967) never made the big leagues.

But in the entry draft era? It's never happened, and short of some career-ending injury, it's hard to imagine that it ever could.

One stop

This is the outcome you're picturing when you imagine a first pick – the guy who becomes a lifer, retiring without ever playing with any other team. And as you'd expect, there are plenty of players in this category, including every pick dating back to 2013 plus other active players like Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin.

Obviously, any of those guys could theoretically play elsewhere before their career ends, so maybe you don't want to count them quite yet. That brings us to the list of retired first picks who only played for one team, and it's a smaller list than you might expect, not to mention a bit of a weird one.

The first name is the one you're already thinking of: Mario Lemieux. But that's it for the Hall of Famers, at least for now. One of the other three names is Ottawa's Chris Phillips, which you might have known if you paid attention to this post a few weeks back. Boston's Gord Kluzak had his career shortened by injury, but only ever played for the Bruins. And the only other name on the list is one that's often called a bust: Rick DiPietro, who spent all 11 of his NHL seasons with the Islanders (and remains on their payroll to this day).

That's it. Only four retired No. 1 picks spent their entire career with one team. So how many made just one other stop?

Two stops

The one-stop group was a short list, once we ruled out the active players. Believe it or not, this one is even shorter.

There are two active first picks who are on their second stop: John Tavares and Steven Stamkos. Among players who are retired, we find only two more names, and they cover both ends of the career success spectrum.

One of them is Mike Modano, who spent 20 seasons with the Minnesota North Stars and Dallas Stars, who for our purposes count as the same team. After that, he spent one year in Detroit, where he played for his good pal Mike Babcock. That wasn't exactly a storybook ending, but it didn't stop Modano from going into the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

It's fair to say that Modano won't be joined in the Hall by our only other two-team pick. That would be Patrik Stefan, the 1999 top pick whose career lasted just seven seasons thanks to injuries and a lack of production. He spent the first six of those with the Atlanta Thrashers before spending one last year, somewhat ironically, in Modano's old stomping grounds in Dallas. Hey, at least that season gave us Stefan's most memorable NHL moment.

Just a few entries in, and I've already learned that first picks don't stick with their teams anywhere near as much as I would have assumed. Let's see how many three-timers we can find.

Three stops

The answer: Six, including one guy who's still active. Feel free to take a moment to see if you can figure out who they are.

We'll start with the active player, who's probably our easiest call. That would be Patrick Kane, who's gone from the Blackhawks to the Rangers to the Red Wings. It's possible that his tour of the Original Six might continue at some point down the line, but for now he's in some decent company.

There are two more names I'm betting most of you will get: Mats Sundin (Nordiques, Leafs and Canucks) and Rick Nash (Blue Jackets, Rangers and Bruins). Vincent Lecavalier is a bit trickier, going from the Lightning to the Flyers to a forgettable half-season with the Kings. And there's also Ed Jovanovski, who had stops with the Canucks and Coyotes in between beginning and ending his career with the Panthers.

There's one more player to go in this category, and we're back to the list of notable draft busts to find him. That would be Nail Yakupov, whose six-season NHL career was the shortest of any first pick in the entry draft era. He spent four of those in Edmonton before moving on to single seasons with the Avalanche and Blues.

Fun fact: If you let Yakupov combine his entire career total of 62 goals into one season, he'd still rank behind the best years of fellow No. 1 picks Mario Lemieux, Auston Matthews, Connor McDavid and Ovechkin. He'd have Stamkos beat by two goals, though.

Four stops

You'd think we'd start hitting some diminishing returns here, but nope – there are five more first picks in the four-team club, two of whom are still active.

The good news is that we're going to run at an 80 percent success rate for getting these guys into the Hall of Fame. Three are already there, with Joe Thornton (Bruins, Sharks, Leafs, Panthers), Eric Lindros (Flyers, Rangers, Leafs, Stars) and Dale Hawerchuk (Jets, Sabres, Blues, Flyers) sitting among the all-time greats. Marc-Andre Fleury is a near-lock to join them three years after he retires, and he's gone from the Penguins to the Knights to the Blackhawks to the Wild.

Our last name in this group may not be done moving around. Erik Johnson was the first pick in 2006 by the Blues. He also had stops in Colorado and Buffalo before his current stint in Philadelphia. He's not playing much for the Flyers these days and will be a UFA at the end of the year, so maybe he sets his sights on five-teamer status.

Five stops

Only two names here. Some of you might come up with Ilya Kovalchuk, who went from Atlanta to New Jersey in his first NHL stint and then covered off the Kings, Canadiens and Capitals in his brief comeback years later.

I'll be more impressed if you had Doug Wickenheiser. He was the Canadiens' somewhat infamous pick in 1980, when they passed over a Quebec kid named Denis Savard. He lasted parts of four years in Montreal before heading on to stops with the Blues, Canucks, Rangers and Capitals. (He was also very briefly Hartford Whalers property during the 1987 waiver draft, but we're not counting that as he never actually played for them.)

So after seeing a somewhat surprising number of names show up among the three and four-team groups, we're down to just two here. Surely that means we don't have many names left, he said, ironically foreshadowing the next group.

Six stops

Six different teams for one player seems like a lot. For someone who was once so highly regarded that they went No. 1, it seems like too much. But this isn't going to be a short list.

Let's start with a Hall of Famer. Pierre Turgeon started with the Sabres, then went to the Islanders, Canadiens, Blues, Stars and Avalanche. Even weirder, at least to me, is that he played more games in St. Louis than anywhere else, even though I barely remember him there.

But OK, that's one guy. Let's stay in the 1980s to find a few more. We can start with Brian Lawton, the first pick in 1983 who managed to pack six different stops into a career that only lasted nine seasons. The last of those was the Sharks, who traded him to his seventh team, the Devils, in 1993 but he never played there. There's also Wendel Clark, who's listed as playing for six teams on Hockey Reference even though we all know he was only ever a Maple Leaf.

(A bit of side trivia: The trade that sent Clark from Toronto to Quebec for Sundin was the only time in NHL history that two first picks have been traded for each other. It was also the first time it had happened in major North American pro sports history, although it's since happened in the NBA and in the NFL.)

Moving onto the 1990s, we start with Owen Nolan, who went first in 1990 and spent 14 seasons in Quebec and San Jose before bouncing around Toronto, Phoenix, Calgary and Minnesota. Alexandre Daigle's NHL career lasted only 10 seasons, but he had enough time for stops in Ottawa, Philadelphia, Tampa, New York (Rangers), Pittsburgh and Minnesota. And there's another Senators first pick, Bryan Berard. He never played for Ottawa, but managed stops with the Islanders, Leafs, Rangers, Bruins, Blackhawks and Blue Jackets and then back to the Islanders, all in just 619 games over an injury-shortened career.

Add it up, and that's six players who were No. 1 picks and then played for six different teams. If we take out the active players, that means that six teams is our magic number – there are more first picks who played for six teams than any other number. A top pick playing for a half-dozen teams by the end of his career is more common than him playing for only one or two. That's... weird, right? I think it's very weird.

And we know it's not even the record because we still haven't got to our old pal Taylor Hall.

Seven stops

We know Hall slots in here. The question is whether anyone joins him. And yes, a pair of guys do.

The first is Joe Murphy, who became the first college player to go first when he was taken by Detroit in 1986. He went from the Wings to the Oilers in a 1989 blockbuster before further stops in Chicago, St. Louis, San Jose, Boston and Washington spelled the end of a troubled career. And there's also Roman Hamrlik, the top pick in 1992 who spent 20 years in the NHL while playing for the Lightning, Oilers, Islanders, Flames, Canadiens, Capitals and Rangers.

So no, Hall isn't the only first pick to ever play for seven different teams. And he doesn't hold the record because we still have one name left...

Eight stops

I'll pause here while you rack your brain to see if you can come up with the name. But it's a tough one, and you have to go way back.

The 1979 draft is often referred to as one of the best ever, partly because the age of eligibility was lowered by a year to create a double-cohort. Mike Gartner and Ray Bourque were top-10 picks, with fellow Hall of Famers Michel Goulet and Kevin Lowe going later in the first round. Mark Messier was picked in the second, and other stars who heard their name called that day include Glenn Anderson, Dale Hunter, Guy Carbonneau and Pelle Lindbergh, among many others.

But none of them went first. That honor belonged to London Knights defenseman Rob Ramage. He went to the Colorado Rockies, where he lasted three years before being dealt to the Blues. His most famous transaction came at the 1988 deadline, when St. Louis sent him to Calgary in the deal that landed them Brett Hull. Ramage won a Cup with the Flames, then went to Toronto where he became captain. From there it was on to Minnesota, Tampa, Montreal and finally Philadelphia.

Add it up, and that's eight teams – the record for most teams played for by a first pick. For now, at least, because at 33 years old and with plenty of apparent road ahead of him, Hall seems like a good bet to catch Ramage as soon as this summer. From there, who knows. Could double-digits be in play? We can't rule it out.

I'll leave you with some numbers. There have been 46 players taken No. 1 in the NHL entry draft, and by my math they've combined to play for 141 teams, an average of just over three each. But that's counting active players, including guys like Macklin Celebrini and Juraj Slafkovský whose careers have barely started. If we only look at players whose careers are over, that gives us 26 players who had stops with 108 teams, an average of 4.15 stops per player. And as we noted, the most common number of teams that shows up is six.

That's way higher than I would have expected, and it means that Hall's vagabond career path isn't as much of an outlier as you might assume. And it also means your dream of seeing Connor Bedard wind up on your favorite team isn't quite as far-fetched and you might think. (Just don't get too attached — he may not stay long.)

The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Will the Mikko Rantanen trade trigger an East arms race?

By Pierre LeBrun – January 30, 2025

The question was a rather simple one.

I reached out Tuesday to general managers for the other top Eastern Conference teams and asked them if Carolina's blockbuster trade would have a tangible impact on how they approach the March 7 trade deadline.

"I don't think so, I don't believe it does," replied Toronto Maple Leafs GM Brad Treliving.

"It doesn't really change anything for us," Chris Patrick, GM of the first-place Washington Capitals, said. "We will follow the same process we always do at this time of year, and if there are opportunities to improve our team, we will pursue them."

It was a quick "No" from Tampa Bay Lightning GM Julien BriseBois.

"For us, it doesn't change anything," Tom Fitzgerald, president of hockey operations and GM of the New Jersey Devils, said. "We go through a process on evaluating our team and identify the areas where we want to improve. We want to be intentional on adding the right piece or pieces while being cognizant of the cost and our future."

The defending Stanley Cup champions aren't going to deviate from their plan, either.

"We've spent the entire season on it: You look at your assets, you look at your standings, you look at your projections, you have your plan, and my plan is to put together the best possible team we can," Bill Zito, president of hockey operations and GM of the Florida Panthers, told The Athletic. "I can't get a better team now than I could a week ago, right?"

"So, I just don't think keeping up with the Joneses is part of the equation for teams. We'll always do our best to get any players and pursue any situation that's going to give us the best chance to win. But I don't think it changes because everyone else is doing it. It's the same."

That's a pretty unanimous reaction.

A team can't let what another one does affect its game plan for the trade deadline. Knee-jerk reaction trades are dangerous. I've had some GMs over the years admit to me a certain trade was just that. And they regretted it later.

The reality is that all of those top teams, most of which have had their pro scouting meetings planning for the deadline, were already focused on the moves they want to make for the deadline before Carolina shocked the hockey world.

The Leafs are looking for a center and perhaps a third-pairing defenseman. That doesn't change.

Fitzgerald told me in a recent interview that the Devils are looking for a center.

The Panthers need a blue-line upgrade after their offseason defections.

The top-scoring Lightning also probably need a blue-line upgrade and are never shy to act at the deadline.

During his annual, in-season session in Tampa with Lightning beat media Monday, BriseBois was asked if anything was off the table ahead of March 7:

“We’re trying to accomplish difficult, challenging, hard things here, and we can’t limit ourselves in terms of what we’re willing to do to accomplish those great things,” he responded.

The surprising Capitals were the most aggressive team last offseason, acquiring via trade the likes of Pierre-Luc Dubois, Jakob Chychrun, Andrew Mangiapane and Logan Thompson, plus adding via free agency the likes of Matt Roy, Jakub Vrana, Taylor Raddysh and Brandon Duhaime.

So they’ve made a lot of roster changes already. But my sense is the Caps would like to add another top-nine winger before the deadline. Whether that’s a second-line or third-line player depends on what the market makes possible. But I believe that’s their stated need internally.

But again, that has nothing to do with reacting to what a divisional rival did. It’s what the Caps have been thinking about for a while now.

Still, what I think Carolina’s bold move also says is that the Hurricanes view the conference as there for the taking. Which I totally concur with.

Let’s see how the other top Eastern teams react before the deadline.

NHL OK with Pietrangelo’s 4 Nations pull-out

There were some eyebrows raised, to be sure, when it was announced Sunday that Alex Pietrangelo was pulling out of 4 Nations, needing to nurse to some ailments, and then proceeded that evening to play 24 minutes for the Golden Knights. Although I believe it is very much genuine that the veteran star blueliner hasn’t been 100 percent.

Either way, the NHL is not concerned about the player’s decision nor the optics for the 4 Nations tournament — that perhaps players want to bail on it.

“I don’t think this is anything like All-Star,” NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic on Monday morning. “(A) player has to do what’s best for him and I have no problem with a decision that takes into account being healthy for his NHL club down the stretch.”

Pietrangelo is a former Olympic champion and it’s hard to fault him for not wanting to play in an event that’s serving as an appetizer to the actual Olympics next year, especially when he’s not fully healthy. His priority is to be in the best shape possible to help Vegas win a Stanley Cup. I totally get that.

Whether or not other players bail for similar reasons in the coming two weeks, we shall see.

For some players, there’s a need to showcase themselves in best-on-best to help secure an Olympic spot in 12 months. For others, while they obviously want to play in the Olympics in Italy next February, if they’re not 100 percent healthy the 4 Nations event doesn’t carry enough weight to take that risk.

Who will replace Pietrangelo?

Team Canada management will take all the time it has before deciding and naming a replacement for Pietrangelo.

“The players are arriving Feb. 9, so if you’re not naming your player by the 10th you’re missing an opportunity for practice time,” Team Canada 4 Nations GM Don Sweeney told The Athletic on Tuesday. “That’s a precious time frame, so we’ll be in front of that date.”

First off, it’s a tough loss indeed not having Pietrangelo.

“We respect his decision, his priorities are with his own health and with Vegas,” Sweeney said. “He’s had a lot of buzz in terms of why pull out if you’re going to play 24 minutes, but he made it very, very clear

to us this is something he's wanted to take care of (his ailments) and the break in the schedule affords him that opportunity.

"So you have to respect it. It's a big loss for us because he's an all-situation player with a lot of experience. He was justifiably named to the team and now we go about our business. As we've said all along, there were going to be some injuries and that we were going to have a tight group of (replacement) guys that we're going to consider depending on the type of player that we've lost."

Sweeney, as always has been the case in our Team Canada discussions, would not get into names as far as replacement options.

But I did ask about Drew Doughty, just because of how unique his situation is. What would Canada have to see from him once he's back to feel comfortable taking him so close to 4 Nations?

"Well, my understanding is that he's going to play soon," Sweeney said. "How many games he's able to play and how quickly he gets up to speed ... (head coach Jon Cooper) will inevitably speak to coaches and see where the player is at. We'll follow up with (Kings GM) Rob Blake to have his input. We're going to do due diligence whether it's Drew or anybody else."

In his first media session since his preseason injury, Doughty over the weekend told L.A. media he was still holding out hope for 4 Nations and really wanted to play in it.

Team Canada has a group of D they are monitoring right now for the replacement spot. A right-shot D like Pietrangelo (and Doughty) is the most likely route.

Aside from Doughty, Evan Bouchard was one of the most glaring omissions on Dec. 4, so he's an obvious name. Dougie Hamilton and Noah Dobson also come to mind. But given the all-around role Pietrangelo would have played in that event, who Team Canada names may very well depend on the exact role they want that player to come in and play.

"You're spot on in terms of us identifying some players that can pick up some slack in some areas in which, with Petro, we would have valued his presence," Sweeney said. "These are all great players, and inevitably they're playing the lion's share of minutes on their current teams. So I don't think having role responsibility will be too foreign to them."

So, for example, if Canada ends up wanting more of a shutdown/penalty-kill guy, Leafs blueliner Chris Tanev would be a name to monitor. There are some who would take MacKenzie Weegar of the Flames for his overall game.

If it were me, I would take two-time Olympic champion Doughty as my top choice if I feel comfortable that he's up to speed. If not, I would go with Tanev for his shutdown capabilities. Just go look at this work on Jack Eichel in the first round last spring followed by his work on Nathan MacKinnon in the second round.

I know Oilers fans are upset Bouchard isn't on the team, and I really like the "Bouch Bomb." But Cale Makar is probably going to play 90 percent of the power-play minutes in that event.

NHL/NHLPA ready to move on without IIHF on 2028 World Cup

Interesting news was broken by TSN colleague Darren Dreger on Monday night via a tweet:

"The NHL and NHLPA have advised the IIHF they intend on moving forward, at least for now, without IIHF involvement in the 2028 World Cup of Hockey. The NHL and PA are hoping to make an announcement on the 2028 WCH in some form at the upcoming Four Nations Faceoff."

One of the main issues appears to be the IIHF's reluctance to support a February World Cup, which is important for the NHL and NHLPA — running it at the same time in the NHL season that an Olympics would run.

Again, the idea starting with the Olympics next February is to have a full, best-on-best international hockey event every two years. Hence plans for a 2028 World Cup of Hockey, followed by the 2030 Olympics, etc.

But it also begs the question? If the NHL and NHLPA are planning a traditional World Cup with lots of countries represented, how will it have access to non-NHL players overseas if IIHF isn't part of it? How do countries like Switzerland and Czechia fill out their rosters beyond their NHL players?

We should get more answers from the league and NHLPA at the 4 Nations next month.

I would also say this: Just because the league says it is ready to move forward on a World Cup without the IIHF at this juncture, that doesn't mean things can't change. I've got a feeling there's still more to play out on this front between all parties.

But in the bigger picture, it does concern me. A permanent, best-on-best international calendar has been a fleeting reality for the best part of 25 years, for various reasons. The Olympic part of it appears settled for now.

Obviously, the plan right now is for the 2028 World Cup to bridge the gap, but it sure isn't smooth sailing getting there.

Sportsnet.ca / From builders to buyers? Teams that have changed their trade outlook

By Justin Bourne – January 30, 2025

In the NHL, as in life, things do not always go as planned.

For example, the Pittsburgh Penguins missed the playoffs by three points last season. They then ran back basically the same star-laden team, added some additional pieces in hopes of getting back to the playoffs, yet find themselves just a breath out of dead stinkin' last in the East. The Seattle Kraken did something similar, signing Chandler Stephenson and Brandon Montour (for many, many dollars) to push them over the hump, but they're no better than last year. It happens.

But with the insane amount of parity in the NHL this season, there's been a new twist on "things don't always go as planned" for a few teams: some saw this as a rebuild, retool, recalibrate year, but they've suddenly got a shot to make the playoffs with just 30 games to go.

This group fascinates me.

To understand how they exist, you've just got to look at the cluster of teams within four points of the Eastern Conference wild card spot. You've got a few tiers of teams in that group.

First, you've got the teams that have clearly been a disappointment. That would be the New York Rangers, who won last season's Presidents' Trophy, yet only recently battled back above .500. That would also be the Boston Bruins, who last season had 109 points, yet wake up Wednesday morning ninth in the East by points percentage. They've opened the door for everyone else.

Then you've got the teams that expected to be in the fight, but haven't taken a step (and in fact, have tripped on their own skate laces). Detroit finished the 2023-24 season tied for the final playoff spot with 91 points, and this season find themselves on pace for...a whopping 87. Last year the Islanders were one of two teams to make the post-season with a negative goal differential, then they did absolutely nothing in the off-season and, weird, they're on pace to finish with about the same goal differential, just well outside the playoffs this time.

Which leaves the "Wait, we're in the playoff race??" teams.

Let's go through the four of them – five if you stretch the definition – and evaluate what the heck they should do with this surprising opportunity.

No team embodies this better than the Flames. They had just recently moved on from Jacob Markstrom and Andrew Mangiapane, clearly signalling a transition and a new chapter for the C of Red. They made way for the young guys, hoping for them to gain valuable experience, likely with the intent of selling off a few pieces at the deadline. But lo, they find themselves peering into February -- with a fairly soft schedule ahead -- from inside the playoff cut line.

A lot has gone right. Dustin Wolf has emerged as not just a Calder Trophy candidate but as a goalie who looks to be among the league's best for years to come (goalie analysts such as Steve Valiquette praise him as the real deal). They've gotten good seasons from the vets they do have, their young guys have shown great potential, and they have one binding thread as a team: they work like hell, particularly on the forecheck. It's a competitive group, so if you don't show up against them, you'll lose.

Now, if they were worse off in the standings would they consider trading Rasmus Andersson? Would they try to unload Nazem Kadri's contract? Maybe.

But they're five points behind the Avs with three games in hand to catch wild card spot number one. And they're three points behind the Kings for the Pacific's three seed. Behind Calgary there's only the dumpster fire that is the current Canucks, a St. Louis Blues team that's well back (five points and two more games played), and I guess Utah? But really it's "stay ahead of the Canucks and you're in."

The Flames are 29th in goals for per game. They have nine draft picks this year, including five in the first two rounds, and nine picks the following year, too (We should note that if they don't finish bottom 10 in the league, they'll give up their own first-rounder to Montreal this year to complete the Sean Monahan trade). They have salary cap space for days. Would it be the worst thing to reward the team with another guy who can shoot it in the net, particularly if they've got some term?

Craig Conroy has a decision to make, as they're not going to win the Cup. But putting your young talent in the playoffs has value too, and could give this franchise something to build on.

Heading into this season, it was hard to see any of the usual suspects in the Atlantic being significantly worse. Florida, Toronto, and Tampa Bay still had loads of talent, and Boston wasn't going to just evaporate. Combine that with expectations being higher for Ottawa, Detroit and heck, Buffalo, and it seemed like the Habs were destined for the basement, or at least a few stairs up from it.

But 50 games into the season, following the successful additions of Alexandre Carrier, rookie Lane Hutson, and Patrik Laine, the Habs are two points out of playoffs. It seemed like a year they were dead set on getting another high pick, but if they wanted to flip the script – which is always tempting – you could see them hanging around the post-season fight. They're not particularly bad from top to bottom when healthy, and numerous players have taken a step forward.

The best thing for this franchise long-term is probably to sell and pick high again. But when you get to this point, and people tell you that you should "reward the players" for putting themselves in the post-season fight, it has to be awfully tough to consider cutting out the knees of the group.

What's better for a team with 21 picks over the next two years: more assets, or meaningful game experience? One is tangible, the other isn't. But you can make a fair case that at this point of the Habs' rebuild, they matter equally.

We've had their GM Danny Briere and President Keith Jones on Real Kypers and Bourne in the past few weeks, and both have said they don't see their team as a contender. They're a seller, they're not good enough. But they're also 6-3-1 in their past 10 and three points outside the playoffs as of today.

Whoops.

This is a team that had zero designs on the post-season, has gotten the league's dead worst goaltending (a combined .875 save percentage), and yet is somehow just a few points from a playoff spot. It's not a mystery how you could get a whole lot better by improving at one position (goalie), and they've also got a whack of draft picks, including six in the first two rounds of 2025.

I know they want to bottom out and do worse, but unfortunately(?), they've got a pretty decent team that's winning a bit too often for that. Which may say more about the rest of the league than it does the Flyers. But still, hat-tip to John Tortorella for taking a team with no expectations that's getting terrible goaltending into the playoff picture this season.

The Blue Jackets finished 16th out of 16 in the East last year, made very few changes except to fire their coach, tragically lost their best offensive talent in Johnny Gaudreau, and yet find themselves tied in points for the second wild card of Wednesday.

All this despite getting the sixth-worst goaltending in the league while having the cheapest payroll in the NHL (Monahan is their top earning forward at 5.5 million per, no other forward makes over \$4 million). Speaking of great coaching staffs: what a job they've done in Columbus.

They're not quite as asset-rich as the above teams, and likely could use a superstar more than any of them, meaning they'd love a high draft pick. But what are you supposed to do? Pull the ripcord on the parachute while you're absolutely flying at 7-2-1 in their past 10, while names like Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov are becoming must-know names?

They're in the playoff hunt, and fully embody the scrappy underdog feel their city can probably connect with among bigger NHL cities. They might just add, and see if they can't squeeze their way into a first round playoff series.

And finally,

The Utah Not Yetis

It's not entirely clear to me what they thought they'd be this season, but a lot of people hyped them up for a team with one forward earning more than \$6 million a year. They did make some off-season adds in hopes of contending, so I don't fully see them as a part of the above class (they're also six points out), but they do have plenty to trade in terms of prospects and picks, so if they wanted to go in, I think they could make a push.

They're more likely an off-season flip-the-lever and chase big UFAs type team than one poised to make a real push this season though. But we'll include them just because if they wanted to get weird (first year in the league!) it's an option.

NHL owners all want to make the playoffs and generate that additional revenue. But they also want sustainability, and they want deep playoff runs, so they'd prefer to make zoomed out decisions based on the long term.

I think the team most likely to buy from the above is Calgary, and the team most likely to sell is Philly. But you don't want to get caught in the mushy middle forever either, just getting in and losing, so these management teams have some big decisions on their hands.

Entering the year "playoffs" barely seemed a consideration for any of these teams, but the way the standings are shaking out is forcing some harder decisions in a way their fans must love.