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## Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets send Daniil Tarasov to AHL Cleveland for conditioning assignment

By Brian Hedger- January 11, 2025

Blue Jackets goaltender Daniil Tarasov is headed to AHL Cleveland for a conditioning assignment.

Previously resistant to the move, Tarasov has backed down after not getting enough usage in Columbus to work through a prolonged slump. Entering Friday holding the second wildcard in the Eastern Conference, the Blue Jackets (19-17-6) couldn't afford to play Tarasov, 25, who has struggled mightily with a 3-6-1 record and .857 save percentage (SV%) in 10 appearances.

"We're trying to do the right thing to get a player ready to play games," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Hockey players need to play hockey, and he hasn't played a lot of hockey. So, that's what we talked about with him, is that 'You need to play hockey,' and he's going to get a chance to play, hopefully tonight and (Saturday), and then we'll see from there."

Tarasov started the season playing in five of the Blue Jackets' first seven games. After taking a 4-3 overtime loss Oct. 26 in Nashville, he allowed seven goals in a Nov. 2 road loss to the Washington Capitals in his next outing and played just four more times in the next 30 games. Sitting for long stretches behind starter Elvis Merzlikins, including a 19-day stretch between losses in Montreal and Edmonton, Tarasov's slump continued to worsen.

"This is kind of like a new role for me," Tarasov recently told the Dispatch. "I've never been, like, the full backup and not playing that much. Nineteen days without a game, it was kind of a tough night in Edmonton. Now, again, I'm benched and there is some reason for it. I was not that good in my last four starts, but this is the new part of the process for me to manage it, all of these things."

Merzlikins has handled the Jackets' No. 1 starter workload most of the way, but not having a backup the coaching staff is comfortable playing was an issue. That's why Tarasov is headed to the Cleveland Monsters and rookie Jet Greaves was recalled in the same batch of transactions.

Greaves, 23, is 1-1-2 with an .890 SV% in four earlier NHL appearances, and he's 4-8-2 with a .907 SV% in 14 career outings with the Blue Jackets since his debut April 4, 2023 in Toronto. He's also posting an excellent developmental season for the Monsters, going 11-5-3 with a .914 SV% in 20 appearances to boost his AHL career numbers with Cleveland to 72-45-14 with a .906 SV% and six shutouts in 138 games.

Greaves has an excellent glove and reaction skills, but he's small by goaltending standards at a listed size of 6 feet, 190 pounds. Tarasov, meanwhile, is 6 feet 5, 203 pounds and has shown elite hand/eye and mobility while putting up impressive statistics in previous seasons.

That's why the Blue Jackets are using a conditioning stint to get him AHL action rather than exposing him to the NHL's other 31 teams via waivers for a traditional assignment. They're not willing to risk losing a goalie who's still in the early stages of his NHL career and has No. 1 starter potential.

"It's no different than a (skater) coming back from injury or who's struggling a bit," Evason said. "Players have to play hockey. You don't just practice hockey, either. You play hockey. So, you need to play hockey in order to get into game shape. The NHL is the best league in the world, so if you're behind it a little bit, it's difficult to play. I don't care if you're a goalie, a winger, a center, defenseman ... it's difficult. So, are we excited he gets a chance to play hockey? For sure."

Along with Tarasov, the Blue Jackets returned rookie forward Owen Sillinger, 27, to Cleveland after making his NHL debut as a replacement for his younger brother, Cole Sillinger, in the Blue Jackets' 6-2 rout of the Seattle Kraken on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 'kids' power blowout of Seattle Kraken: 4 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- January 11, 2025

A roomful of injured NHL regulars watched the Blue Jackets on Thursday from Nationwide Arena's press level.

Captain Boone Jenner (shoulder), center Sean Monahan (wrist), forward Justin Danforth (lower body) and alternate captain Erik Gudbranson (shoulder) sat next to top prospect Cayden Lindstrom (back), while center Cole Sillinger (illness) and defenseman Jack Johnson (illness) watched elsewhere.

The Blue Jackets' list of injuries and illnesses is growing for the third straight season, but it's different this time. The veterans are still missed, but the Jackets are also loaded now with emerging talent that continues to ripen in the NHL and with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters. The annual health conundrum is more of a side note than a season-crushing subplot, which is evidence the Blue Jackets' rebuild is trending up.

Their kids can play, which they proved again Thursday in a 6-2 victory over the Seattle Kraken. Despite icing a lineup with young players skating in some key roles, the Jackets steamrolled Seattle with two goals scored by veterans (Zach Werenski and Sean Kuraly), two goals scored by young NHL forwards (Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson), and two goals by rookies (Denton Mateychuk and Luca Del Bel Belluz).

The future in Columbus appears bright and present. Here are four takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets' prowess grows at Nationwide Arena

After storming back for a rare road victory Tuesday in Pittsburgh, where they hadn't won since 2015, the Blue Jackets returned to the comforts of home ice to face the Kraken.

It was another rousing success in front of 15,497, who watched the hosts improve their record on home ice to 14-5-3 while trouncing Seattle with a four-goal second period. The Blue Jackets are 5-12-3 on the road, which will likely determine their playoff fate.

Improving on the road while continuing to win in Columbus could become an unthinkable golden ticket to the postseason for a team that was universally written off before playing a single game.

Columbus Blue Jackets rookie Denton Mateychuk picks timely game for first NHL goal

Mateychuk played his eighth NHL game and continues to impress while shifting with veteran Ivan Provorov on the Blue Jackets' second defensive pairing.

After notching his first career point with an assist on New Year's Eve against the Carolina Hurricanes, Mateychuk scored his NHL goal to help the Jackets build a 5-1 lead in the second period against Seattle. His tally made it 4-1 after he pinched low to the bottom of the left circle to get a feed from James van Riemsdyk.

Mateychuk's dad, Jason, celebrated in the stands while visiting his son from their hometown of Dominion City, Manitoba in Western Canada (population 319).

"It's awesome," Mateychuk said. "I wouldn't be here without him. He's done so much for me over the years, and it's awesome to have him in attendance tonight."

Columbus Blue Jackets developing 'swagger' at NHL, AHL levels

Rookie call-ups from the past three seasons enjoyed playing in the NHL with the Blue Jackets, but those were grim years in Columbus. This year is different with the Jackets contending for the playoffs midway through the season and the Cleveland Monsters battling for the top spot in the AHL North again.

“They’ve got swagger (and) they’ve got confidence,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “Most of those guys who come up, they’ve got a ton of points (for the Monsters), but they play the right way. It just sets them up to have success when they get here.”

Columbus Blue Jackets rookie Owen Sillinger replaces one ‘Silly’ with another

Owen Sillinger got a call Thursday he’s been waiting a long time to receive. Chris Clark, the Blue Jackets’ director of player personnel and the Cleveland Monsters’ GM, told the 27-year old rookie forward to start heading South to Columbus.

The Blue Jackets used an emergency recall to add Sillinger for his NHL debut, which happened because his younger brother, Cole, was sick. It was a “Silly for Silly” swap that put a smile on a lot of Blue Jackets faces.

“Things happened in a weird way,” Owen Sillinger said. “(Cole) called me and said, ‘I can’t even get to the bathroom on my own. Like, you’re going to be in,’ and I was like, ‘Yeah, absolutely. I already talked to ‘Clarky’ and I’m way ahead of ya.’”

Owen Sillinger agreed to his first NHL contract last offseason with the Jackets. He’s now the third member of the Sillinger family to play for the Blue Jackets, following Cole and their father, Mike, who played two seasons (2001-03) in Columbus.

## Columbus Dispatch / Jet Greaves leads Columbus Blue Jackets past St. Louis Blues for fourth straight win

**By Brian Hedger- January 12, 2025**

The only thing that would've improved the Blue Jackets' trip home Saturday would've been a zero on the scoreboard for the St. Louis Blues.

Colton Parayko spoiled that possibility by scoring a 6-on-4 goal with 10.5 seconds left to nix rookie Jet Greaves' bid for his first NHL shutout, but the Blue Jackets still left Enterprise Center satisfied after a gritty 2-1 road win over the Blues for their first four-game win streak since Feb. 17-24, 2022 under former coach Brad Larsen. Greaves made 31 saves, his teammates blocked 23 shots and the Blue Jackets (20-17-6) hung onto the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference ahead of the Montreal Canadiens and Pittsburgh Penguins.

"The guys were great in front of me," Greaves said on FanDuel Sports Network's postgame broadcast. "They did a really good job clearing out the second chances, boxing out, and the special teams were really good, as well. I thought it was a great team effort. The buy-in from all the guys is so important, and we had that tonight."

Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger scored goals in the first two periods to build a two-goal lead starting the third, which set the stage for Greaves to clinch the victory with 14 saves on 15 shots in the final period — losing the shutout on Parayko's goal with Blue Jackets star defenseman Zach Werenski in the penalty box and Blues goalie Jordan Binnington (28 saves) on the bench for an extra skater.

"Jet stood on his head tonight," Fantilli said. "He was great. I wish we could've gotten the shutout for him there with 10 seconds left, but he's awesome. Anytime he's up here (from AHL Cleveland), you have a sense of confidence back there, and he's been playing great. It's awesome to see."

Fantilli's 10th goal of the season gave the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead with 4:22 left in the first period. It also rewarded his team for a good start to a road game, which hasn't been easy for the Jackets to do this season. Dmitri Voronkov won a puck battle against Blues defenseman Cam Fowler in the right-wing corner and sent a quick pass to Marchenko in the right circle. Marchenko sent Fantilli a feed to the low slot, where he collected the puck and sent it into an open net with Binnington caught out of position.

Greaves stopped all nine Blues shots in the first, including a terrific save with his left pad to deflect a hard wrist shot by Robert Thomas at 4:31 to keep it 0-0. The Jackets' rookie netminder made eight more saves in the second to keep St. Louis from scoring while the Jackets upped their lead to 2-0 on Sillinger's power-play goal with 3:09 left in the period.

The Blues were inspired started the third, but Greaves had an answer for everything they threw at him until Parayko's goal late. It started with him calmly making two huge saves with his glove early in the third against Pavel Buchnevich, keeping it 2-0 on shots that left the Blues shaking their heads.

The victory was also the second in a row on the road for the Blue Jackets, who've struggled all season away from Nationwide Arena. After downing the Pittsburgh Penguins on Tuesday in Pittsburgh and the Blues on Saturday night in St. Louis, the Jackets are still just 6-12-3 on the road.

"(Players) take pride in that, too, right?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said during the televised portion of his postgame press conference. "They don't want to have the road record be what it is, so they're competing their butts off to try to win hockey games out here."

## Columbus Dispatch / Greaves backstops 'greasy' road win for Columbus Blue Jackets: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- January 13, 2025

You're not going to score six goals every night in the NHL, but it might feel that way to the Blue Jackets.

After scoring six or more goals 10 times in 42 games, or roughly once every four games, the Blue Jackets took their attack on the road Saturday against the St. Louis Blues. They got only two pucks past Blues goalie Jordan Binnington in a 2-1 victory, but a bushel of goals wasn't necessary to notch their first four-game winning streak since February 17-24, 2022.

All the Blue Jackets (20-17-3) needed to edge the Blues were two goals, a sea of defensive sticks, razor-sharp rookie Jet Greaves, 23 blocked shots and a little grease.

"Jet was real solid tonight, real calm back there," Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger said. "(He) made some huge saves for us, good special teams, get (a goal) on the power play, good on the penalty kill ... and just kind of a greasy 2-1 road win. We talked about being better on the road and being able to win hockey games like that, and this is a big one for our group."

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Jet Greaves stole win vs St. Louis Blues

The Blue Jackets played a solid road game through two periods and took a 2-0 lead into the third on goals by Adam Fantilli and Sillinger — their top two centers with Sean Monahan (wrist) and Boone Jenner (shoulder) out. The third belonged to St. Louis, and the Blues threw everything they had at Greaves.

Utilizing quickness and a great glove hand, he stopped all but one shot by Colton Parayko with 10.5 seconds left and the Blues holding a 6-on-4 advantage. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blues generated 76% of 5-on-5 attempts in the third (19-6), 73% of unblocked attempts (11-4), 82% of shots (9-2) and had large advantages in scoring chances (13-1) and high-danger chances (4-0).

Greaves handled it like a seasoned veteran.

"It's just trusting myself and trusting the guys around me," he said on the FanDuel Sports Network postgame TV broadcast. "The guys did a really good job on the secondary chances there, and did a good job with the traffic, just clearing out the sightlines. Then, it's just competing and doing everything we can to keep the puck out of our net and get the two points."

Columbus Blue Jackets lose Zach Aston-Reese to injury

The Blue Jackets were credited with six of their 23 blocked shots in the third period, but four other Blues attempts were officially listed as "blocked by teammate," on the NHL's official play-by-play log.

Zach Aston-Reese was credited for one 2:21 into the third that slammed into his torso off Ryan Suter's stick from the left point, but it also knocked him out of the game with an upper-body injury. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason didn't have an update on the veteran forward after the game, saying he was still being evaluated.

Should Aston-Reese have to miss games, he'll join a list of injured regulars that includes Monahan, Jenner, Yegor Chinakhov, Erik Gudbranson and Justin Danforth.

Columbus Blue Jackets already have seven players with double-digit goals



After struggling to produce offensively for much of the season's first half, second-year center Adam Fantilli is heating up. His goal with 4:22 left in the first period against the Blues was his 10th of the season and gave the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead. It also gave them another player with double digits in goals.

Fantilli is the seventh Blue Jackets players with 10 or more goals through their first 43 games. The others are Kirill Marchenko (18), Dmitri Voronkov (17), Monahan (14), Zach Werenski (13), Kent Johnson (11) and Mathieu Olivier (10).

Sillinger, who put the Blue Jackets up 2-0 late in the second period, is the next closest to 10 with seven goals.

Adam Fantilli thriving with Columbus Blue Jackets' top line

Fantilli's goal was the third the Blue Jackets' top forward line has generated two-plus goals since he took over as Monahan's replacement in the third period of the Jackets' 4-3 shootout win Tuesday in Pittsburgh. He has six points on three goals and three assists during a five-game points streak, and the goal Saturday was his fourth in the past eight games.

Skating with Voronkov and Marchenko, Fantilli is having success while applying some of what he's learned by watching Monahan center the two high-skill Russian wingers. His goal in St. Louis was the result of their growing chemistry, even though Fantilli almost missed a fake shot and pass that froze Blues goalie Jordan Binnington.

"I thought he was shooting it, too, to be honest with you," Fantilli said. "I just know when (Marchenko) has the puck in those areas, I have to be ready for it, because he can be faking it, and he could be slipping (me a pass). I've just got to stay right in there, and it ended up coming to me ... and the fake was so good that Binnington wasn't really in the net there, so it worked out."

St. Louis Blues coach Jim Montgomery 0-3-0 vs Columbus Blue Jackets this season

The Blue Jackets downed St. Louis twice within a week to sweep the two-game season series against the Blues, but they also swept a three-game "set" coach Jim Montgomery.

He also ran the Boston Bruins' bench Nov. 18 in the Blue Jackets' 5-1 victory at TD Garden. That loss prompted Montgomery's firing the following day and led to the Blues hiring him six days later. No wonder the Blues came out breathing fire while down 2-0 starting the third period Saturday night.

## The Athletic / Jet Greaves impresses and Blue Jackets dig deep for gutsy road win in St. Louis

**By Aaron Portzline- January 12, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets, to the surprise of many, have been holding on to a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference since early last week. But there's no way that could be sustained in the second half of the season unless they learned to start winning games away from Nationwide Arena.

Maybe they're onto something now.

Goaltender Jet Greaves, up from AHL Cleveland to make a spot start, had 31 saves and came within 10.8 seconds of a shutout, leading the Blue Jackets to a hard-fought 2-1 win over the St. Louis Blues before 17,591 in Enterprise Center.

Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger, two young centers moving up in the lineup due to the injury absence of Sean Monahan, scored the goals, and the Blue Jackets combined for 23 blocked shots to win their second straight game on the road for the first time this season.

"We talk about our road record — you guys talk about, we talk about it as coaches — but (the players) take pride in that, too, right?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in St. Louis. "They won't want the road record to be what it is so they're working to change that."

Saturday's win, coupled with a 4-3 shootout win in Pittsburgh on Tuesday, pushed the Blue Jackets' road record to 6-12-3.

The Blues made a push in the third period, as you'd expect, but the Blue Jackets didn't cave under the pressure. They were controlled and structured, making smart puck plays that made St. Louis go 200 feet with the puck to earn scoring chances.

If you've watched the Blue Jackets in recent seasons, you've seen how often they'd come unglued under pressure near the end of a tight game. There was none of that feeling in the air Saturday.

The only goal the Blues scored — the shutout spoiler in the final seconds — came on the power play, which gave St. Louis a six-on-four advantage with goaltender Jordan Binnington pulled for an extra skater.

"These road games are going to be huge going forward," Fantilli said. "We weren't great at the start of the season. Hopefully, we can turn that around and make it a strength of ours."

The Blue Jackets have won four straight and are 8-2-1 since Dec. 19. They hold the eighth and final playoff spot — the second wild card — in the mucky middle of the Eastern Conference.

The win improved them to 20-17-6. They didn't win their 20th game last season until March 2, their 60th game of the season.

"I thought the guys were great in front of me," said Greaves, who had to make 14 of his saves in the third period. "They did a really good job cleaning out the secondary chances and boxing out (at net-front).

"The buy-in from the guys was so important, and we definitely had that tonight."

Greaves made a glove save look easy in the first seconds of the third period when St. Louis' Pavel Buchnevich was left alone in front of the net. Later in the third, Greaves again flashed the glove to deny Blues forward Robert Thomas from low in the right circle.

“Jet was really sound for us,” Evason said. “Everybody’s buying in to do the right thing, buying in to keeping the puck out of the net. We did a lot of good things to play a sound defensive hockey game. Unfortunately, we didn’t keep it out (of the net) at the end, but we did a lot of good things to keep it out for most of the night.

“We didn’t feed their rush. We didn’t feed into their offensive production. We were sound defensively. When we didn’t have plays, we were able to get it behind them and get in on the forecheck.”

The Blue Jackets took a 1-0 lead at 15:38 of the first period. Dmitri Voronkov won a puck battle along the end boards and sent the pass out to Kirill Marchenko, the Blue Jackets’ leading goal scorer and maybe the best shooter on the roster.

Everybody expected Marchenko to shoot, but instead, he found Fantilli just outside the crease in front of Binnington, who lunged to his left anticipating a Marchenko shot. That allowed Fantilli to bury the puck into the abandoned net off his backhand.

The Jackets pushed the lead to 2-0 late in the second with a goal from their second power-play unit. James van Riemsdyk gathered the puck from behind the net and found Sillinger out front for a point-blank roofer.

The only bad news on the night for Columbus was an injury to third-line winger Zach Aston-Reese, who left the game after blocking a shot with his abdomen on the first shift of the third period. He did not return, joining a growing list of injured Blue Jackets forwards.

The Blue Jackets have played all season without captain Boone Jenner (shoulder). They’ve not only stayed afloat but moved into the upper half of the conference without forwards Yegor Chinakhov (upper body) and Justin Danforth (lower body) in the lineup.

Monahan, the club’s No. 1 center, injured his wrist in the win Tuesday in Pittsburgh. He’s out for an unspecified amount of time. Now Aston-Reese is injured.

This was the definition of a gutsy win. Defenseman Dante Fabbro blocked seven shots. Sillinger, two nights after missing a game with an illness, won 11 of 16 faceoffs. Mathieu Olivier had five hits.

“That was kind of a greasy, 2-1 road win,” Sillinger said. “We’ve talked about being better on the road and being able to win a game like that, so that’s a big one for our group.”

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Don Waddell may face good problem at NHL trade deadline

**By Aaron Portzline- January 13, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: A good problem

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell started smiling midway through the question as if he knew it was coming, or perhaps because he'd pondered it himself.

The Blue Jackets, after Tuesday's momentous shootout win in Pittsburgh, moved into the eighth and final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. They remain there today following Saturday's 2-1 win in St. Louis, the Blue Jackets' season-long fourth-straight win.

It wasn't supposed to go this way, of course. The Blue Jackets were expected to be one of the worst teams in the NHL this season, and that was before a barrage of significant injuries struck late in training camp and early in the regular season.

Waddell, hired in May after leaving the Carolina Hurricanes, figured to have a pretty simple approach to his first trade deadline in Columbus — sell off unrestricted free agents for draft picks or prospects and keep loading up for the future.

But what if the future is now?

There's a long way to go, of course. And the pace of play will only ramp up between now and the March 7 trade deadline. But if the Blue Jackets are in a playoff spot, or within sniffing distance of one, how will Waddell handle one of the biggest days on the NHL calendar?

Waddell smiled when it was suggested that the players may put him in a difficult spot.

"I hope they do," he said. "There's nothing wrong with that.

"I like the way we're playing. We're playing hard. It's still the early part of January. We'll see how things transpire. Those are decisions ... I always say that players make the decisions for me, and that's very true in this case, too. We'll see how it goes the next two months."

Waddell wouldn't discuss the dynamics around any specific player, of course. But he spoke broadly about the pending unrestricted free agents on the roster.

If the Blue Jackets were wedged at the bottom of the standings, as they've been the previous two seasons, Waddell would simply accept the best offer for a UFA who wouldn't be back next season with Columbus.

It's hard to envision a scenario in which Waddell is a significant buyer. But if the Blue Jackets remain in the hunt, he could make modest moves to upgrade the roster. It's more likely he decides to keep some of the UFAs for the stretch run, he said.

"If you are going to move a UFA and you don't get your established price tag, you might just keep the player," Waddell said. "Treat him as your own deadline rental.

"Instead of trading a player for, I don't know, a fourth-round pick ... I mean, we have lots of picks. I'm not worried about that. I might just keep the player."

The Blue Jackets' UFAs are forwards Sean Kuraly, Mathieu Olivier, James van Riemsdyk, Justin Danforth, Zach Aston-Reese and Kevin Labanc; and defensemen Ivan Provorov, Dante Fabbro and Jack Johnson.

## Item No. 2: Silliness

Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger scored a power-play goal late in the second period on Saturday in St. Louis, his first game-winning goal of the season in a 2-1 win over the Blues. Meanwhile, in Cleveland, center Owen Sillinger scored the overtime winner in AHL Cleveland's 2-1 win over AHL Laval.

It was the perfect topper for what was an incredible week for the family.

Let's start with Wednesday, which started ominously enough with Cole feeling under the weather and missing Blue Jackets practice. By the next morning, he was so under the weather that he was taking fluids intravenously to prevent dehydration.

The Blue Jackets, needing to recall another center to play that night vs. Seattle — Luca Del Bel Belluz was recalled a day earlier for injured top center Sean Monahan — put in an emergency recall for Owen, who, at 27 years old, had waited and worked a long time toward an NHL debut.

One might assume two hockey-playing brothers from western Canada may have had some rough-and-tumble moments through the years, but the relationship between Cole and Owen is something to behold.

Owen, even as he stuck it out for four years at tiny Bemidji State and even as he signed a minor-league contract and toiled away from the NHL, has never shown a shred of jealousy or envy toward Cole, who hit the NHL as an 18-year-old and, at 21, is already in his fourth year.

## ROOKIE LAP

Owen Sillinger's ready to make his @NHL debut! 🥳 [pic.twitter.com/jQ3LpTgC3X](https://pic.twitter.com/jQ3LpTgC3X)

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) January 9, 2025

There was irony in the fact Owen's NHL debut — he played 13:09 in a 6-2 win over Seattle — came only because his brother couldn't play.

There was also beauty in it, Cole said.

"Pretty unbelievable," Cole said. "He's 27. His path to get to the NHL and make his debut ... it was a pretty emotional night for me, for (brother) Lucas, for my parents, everyone. Owen had some past coaches in the building. He had coaches from Cleveland drive down.

"I like how his debut was all about him. It wasn't about him and I playing together. I thought that was pretty special. Hopefully, we play a game together and that can be about us, but I'm glad that his debut was all about him. He's earned that."

Former Blue Jackets center Mark Letestu, now an assistant coach in Cleveland, made the trip to Columbus on Thursday even though the Monsters had a game the following day in Cleveland.

"I had to be in attendance," Letestu said in a text exchange with The Athletic on Thursday. "I'm coming down to watch this one."

Asked if he had any quiet moments during the day on Thursday to think about his path, the people who helped pave it, the many hours he'd spent in pursuit of playing in the NHL, etc. He smiled and exhaled.

"Honestly, during the day, I was trying to stay in the moment and just have fun with it and just be present," Sillinger said. "It's every hockey player's dream to play in the NHL. I'm no different. So it's everyone who supported me throughout my career. I'm so thankful for them."

“And to do it in this locker room, with an organization I’ve been with since the start of my pro career, it’s very special to me.”

Mike Sillinger was, of course, the first member of the family to dress for the Blue Jackets. He played 155 games for Columbus during the 2001-02 and 2002-03 seasons.

According to the NHL, this marks the fifth time in league history that a father and two sons have played for the same franchise. The others: Peter, Pal and Yan Stastny with the St. Louis Blues; Gordie, Mark and Marty Howe with the Hartford Whalers; Bryan Sr., Bryan Jr. and Dennis Hextall with the New York Rangers; and Lester, Lynn and Muzz Patrick, also with the Rangers.

#### Item No. 3: Take 5, Jared Boll

Take 5 is a quick, breezy sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach or front-office staffer. This week’s features assistant coach and former player Jared Boll:

##### 1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

We’ve been in Dublin now for a while. We love it. It’s got everything you need. The kids are happy, they’re in school. There’s a lot of golf up there. They’ve really built up Bridge Park area, and that’s got everything you need.

##### 2. What’s your biggest surprise with Columbus?

I’d never been to Columbus or even Ohio before I was drafted. But I’d only really lived in the Midwest. I grew up in Chicago, played in Plymouth (Mich.), played in Lincoln (Neb.) ... I always loved Columbus. It just felt like where I was supposed to be right away. I’m not a California guy. I loved my time there, and the people (with the Anaheim Ducks) were great, but both my wife (Lauren) and I couldn’t wait to get back to Ohio. People thought we were crazy. We lived in Newport Beach, had the ocean right there, everything you could ask for. We couldn’t wait to move back to Columbus.

##### 3. Favorite restaurant in Columbus?

Probably my favorite place is Sushi.com in Dublin. It’s a hidden gem, but people who go there say it’s the only place they go for sushi. Ken, the owner, is awesome. We used to always go to Oscar’s (in old Dublin) but that’s not there anymore. We like Tucci’s, or really anywhere in Bridge Park. We go to El Vaquero as a family a lot. I get the Tacos Roberto. My kids love it. We pretty much go there weekly.

##### 4. Who’s the best player you’ve played with and against?

Obviously, with my time here in Columbus, it would be Nasher (Rick Nash), and probably every guy who’s come through here would say that. The one I didn’t spend a lot of time with, but he was amazing, is Ryan Getzlaf in Anaheim. Big, tough counterman. A really cool guy to play with, an awesome teammate. The best I’ve played against? Sidney Crosby, who’s just been so good for so long. I don’t want to say he’s under the radar, but the guy people should talk about more is Pavel Datsyuk. Just stupid. His strength, the way he protected the puck, he played 200 feet.

##### 5. Which teammate should have a podcast?

I want to say Fordo (assistant coach Scott Ford), maybe. He has lots to say. He went to Brown. It might get a little boring. The guy I know the best is Boone. He’s the only guy left that I played with. But Boone doesn’t talk enough.

#### Item No. 4: Snacks

- The Blue Jackets exhaled last week when told by team doctors that Monahan’s right wrist is merely sprained. “There’s no fracture,” Waddell said. But it’s still not known — or publicly stated — how much

time Monahan may miss, though Waddell made it clear he won't play for at least a week. "I don't think it's long-term, but we'll know more soon," he said. Waddell also said there was so much swelling after Monahan's wrist bent awkwardly on a hit by Pittsburgh defenseman Kris Letang last Tuesday that doctors weren't quite able to make a firm soft-tissue diagnosis.

- Adam Fantilli, 20, has moved up into Monahan's spot on the No. 1 line between Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko since Monahan got injured during Tuesday's win in Pittsburgh. He scored the tying power-play goal with 2:36 remaining to push the game beyond regulation. Two nights later, against Seattle, he had an assist and a plus-2 rating in a win over the Kraken. Then, on Saturday, Fantilli scored a goal, had a plus-1 rating, had a game-high six shots and went 7-for-14 on faceoffs.
- Many have asked when the NHL and Blue Jackets will reveal the sweater they'll wear for the March 1 Stadium Series outdoor game against the Detroit Red Wings in Ohio Stadium. Blue Jackets players and staffers have seen the sweaters, but the design is considered top secret. (We can confirm a Boomer/Brutus mashup will not be part of the look.) A team official told The Athletic late last week that the big reveal will likely come within the next two weeks. Stay tuned.
- There has been much speculation in recent days that the Blue Jackets may be a club to watch as a trade partner with the Vancouver Canucks, who are reportedly listening to trade offers for feuding teammates J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson. The internet buzz suggested that a Pettersson trade had been discussed with the Blue Jackets, but a team source told The Athletic on Friday that no such trade talks have taken place.
- As expected, the Blue Jackets recalled goaltender Daniil Tarasov on Sunday from his two-start conditioning assignment with AHL Cleveland. On Friday, he allowed five goals on 30 shots in a 5-0 loss to Laval, which is coached by former Blue Jackets bench boss Pascal Vincent. On Saturday, he made 34 stops in a 2-1 overtime win against Laval.
- Tarasov declined to accept a conditioning assignment last month but accepted the Blue Jackets' second offer last week. Why the change of heart? "Laying out a specific schedule for him I think was the difference," Waddell said. "We said 'Go down there, play the back-to-back, and then we have a day off (Sunday) with a lot of games coming up. We'll get you in one of these games coming up here.' His decision was quick." Waddell told Tarasov, who has started just two of the Blue Jackets' last 26 games, that he only wanted him to get a feel for the puck in game situations in Cleveland so he wouldn't be cold stepping into his next NHL start. "The key is, he can't sit long when he comes back," he said. "I told him, 'I don't care if you give up 10 goals a game, it's getting the game experience, getting back in the middle of a game, feeling it again.'" That Tarasov played so well on Saturday — he was the game's first star — is a bonus. Starting with Tuesday's game vs. Philadelphia, the Blue Jackets play seven games in 12 days.

SILLY GETS IT DONE ON THE POWER PLAY 🌟 @FanaticsBook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/jaBW2kjpQQ

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) January 12, 2025

- The Blue Jackets power play scored again (Sillinger) on Saturday, continuing a torrid pace over the last month or so. Dating to Dec. 8 — a span of 18 games — the Blue Jackets are 16 of 45 (35.6 percent) with a man advantage, scoring at least one power-play goal in 12 of those 16 games. During that span, only Winnipeg (37.8 percent) has been hotter.
- Zach Werenski was held off the scoresheet on Saturday, ending a five-game point streak. But Werenski is still at work on a much more impressive streak, having scored in 16 consecutive home games dating to Oct. 30. Consider the names of the only players with longer home point streaks: Bobby Orr (25 games, 1974-75; and 21 games, 1970-71), Paul Coffey (23 games, 1985-86), Phil Housley (22 games, 1991-92),

John Van Boxmeer (19 games, 1981-82), Brian Leetch (18 games, 1991-92) and Ray Bourque (17 games, 1992-93). Werenski will try for 17 straight on Tuesday when the Blue Jackets host Philadelphia.

- Sunday Gathering trivia: The Blue Jackets' 4-3 shootout win in Pittsburgh last Tuesday snapped a 15-game losing streak (0-10-5) on the road against the Penguins. Who's next on the "struggle city" list? Against which NHL opponent do the Blue Jackets currently own their longest road losing skid?
- Saturday's 2-1 win in St. Louis marked the first time in almost a year that the Blue Jackets won a road game while scoring two goals or less. The last time it happened was Jan. 30, 2024, a 1-0 win that also took place in St. Louis. On that night, Elvis Merzlikins pitched a 21-save shutout.
- Trivia answer: The Blue Jackets have dropped nine straight (0-7-2) in Nashville, a losing streak that dates to March 30, 2019. Between 2006-2011, when the Jackets and Predators were both in the Central Division, the Blue Jackets once lost 17 in a row (0-12-5) in Music City.



## [BlueJackets.com / Owen Sillinger's journey leads him to NHL debut](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- January 11, 2025

It would have been easy to wonder if the day would ever come.

Owen Sillinger probably can't imagine not playing hockey – it's what the Sillingers do – and with each day that went by, the overarching goal remained the same. He wanted to be an NHL player.

It took him longer than most, but Sillinger can say that he's achieved that goal. At 27 years, 108 days old, he stepped onto the ice last night for the Blue Jackets and became the third Sillinger to have his name emblazoned on the back of a union blue sweater, making his NHL debut in the 6-2 win over Seattle at Nationwide Arena.

He became the eighth-oldest player in team history to make his NHL debut, and his road certainly varied from that of his brother, Cole, who was in the league at age 18. But Sillinger never doubted he had what it took to reach the highest level, and it paid off last night.

"I have a big belief in myself as a player and most importantly as a person," said Sillinger, who was returned to the AHL today. "I knew if I did the right things every day, eventually I'd get my opportunity. You never know what's going to happen, and mine actually ended up happening to be (Thursday) in the whirlwind of situations that had to take place to get me here, but I'm here. I made the most of it. We got a great team win and I had a positive impact, so I'm very proud."

Sillinger skated 13:09 – including 1:30 of shorthanded time – over 16 shifts in his debut, and filled up the stat sheet in a variety of ways. Playing on a line with Mikael Pyyhtia and Kevin Labanc, he had one shot attempt, one hit and a takeaway, blocked a shot, won two faceoffs and even took a penalty in the final moments of the runaway victory.

The irony, of course, is that he made it to Columbus and into the lineup at the expense of his younger brother, who was unable to play because of illness. With Sean Monahan already out with an upper body injury and then Cole feeling unwell, Owen was summoned from AHL Cleveland on Thursday morning, racing down Interstate 71 to get ready for his debut.

Once he got to Columbus, he talked to his brother, who tried to let Owen know that he'd be in the lineup only to be foiled by Monsters general manager and CBJ director of player personnel Chris Clark.

"(Cole) called me and he said, 'Owen, I can't even get to the bathroom on my own. You're gonna be in,'" Owen said. "I'm like, 'Absolutely. I already talked to Clarky. I already knew ahead of you.' It was funny."

While the Sillingers took quite a different path to the league – Cole went right into the NHL as a rookie before ever playing an AHL game, while Owen is in his fourth season with the Monsters – head coach Dean Evason said their games bear more than a passing resemblance.

"Yeah, 100 percent," Evason said. "Just sound. He was the second over the boards killing penalties. First game in the National League. He's a very responsible guy and did all the right things."

Sillinger learned that part of the game in a variety of ways, and it certainly didn't hurt that father Mike played 17 NHL seasons with 12 teams, including two with the Blue Jackets. Owen is one of three Sillinger brothers that play hockey, starting with three high-scoring seasons with Penticton of the BCHL. From there, he went to Bemidji State, where he played four years with the Beavers and had 115 points in 134 games.

Cleveland signed him as soon as his college career ended in 2022, and Sillinger has been with the Monsters ever since, playing in 192 games in his four seasons with 33 goals and 110 points. His all-around play in Cleveland his first three years was impressive enough that he signed his first NHL contract with the Blue Jackets this summer.

Sillinger impressed during training camp and was on the bubble to make the roster before returning to Cleveland to start the season, and the thought was it was likely he'd return at some point this year. Thursday was that day, and while he described it as a "roller coaster of emotions," he tried to stay as even-keel as possible.

"Honestly, during the day, I was just trying to stay in the moment and just have fun with it and just try to be present," Sillinger said. "It's every hockey player's dream to play in the NHL; mine is no different. Everyone who supported me throughout my career, I'm so thankful for, and to do it in this locker room with an organization that I've been with from the very start of my pro career, it's something very special to me."

While Sillinger was returned to Cleveland on Friday as Cole, he has shown he has what it takes to perform at the highest level, and the memory of last night's win will last forever for the latest member of the family to make it to the NHL.

"I know my dad and my brother and my whole family are very proud of me," he said. "I couldn't be happier to be here."

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: A memorable night for Del Bel Belluz, Mateychuk](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- January 11, 2025

After CBJ wins, we'll give three takeaways about what stood out or what we'll remember from the Blue Jackets victory.

BLUE JACKETS 6, KRAKEN 2

1. Denton Mateychuk's first career goal highlighted another standout performance.

Through his first seven NHL games, the rookie defenseman had showcased a smooth, smart game that belied his inexperience in the pros. Mateychuk already appears to think the game at a much more advanced level than most 20-year-olds on the blue line, and he was focused much more on the steady than the spectacular to begin his NHL career.

That meant he had a lone point – an assist – in those first seven contests, but we know he has some offense in his game, as evidenced by eye-popping numbers at both the junior and minor league level. And Mateychuk showed those offensive instincts as he notched his memorable tally in the second period to give the Blue Jackets a 4-1 lead.

As James van Riemsdyk took the puck behind the CBJ net, Mateychuk's hockey IQ took over and he started to come down from the left point into the play. From there, van Riemsdyk's sharp-angle shot off the pads of goalie Philipp Grubauer ended up being the perfect pass onto Mateychuk's stick, and he slid the puck into the net – in "slow motion," as he put it – for the goal.

"I saw JV come around the net and he kind of turned back," Mateychuk said. "He was looking the other way, but I kind of knew he knew where I was, and then I just kept sliding and sure enough he put it to the back door and I was able to put it in."

Mateychuk later got the assist on Kirill Marchenko's empty-net goal for his first multipoint night at the NHL level. The NHL is an unforgiving place for a rookie, but for the time being, he appears to have cemented himself as a top-four defenseman for the Blue Jackets, and one gets the feeling there's even more to his game than he's shown to this point.

Thursday night was just the start of that.

"I think you grip the stick a little tighter when you're still waiting for the first, so to get it out of the way, I think it's good," he said. "I don't remember much (after the goal). It was a pretty cool moment."

2. Luca Del Bel Belluz didn't miss a beat in his first NHL game of the season.

Fans of a certain age will remember what ESPN's Chris Berman always said about Hall of Fame wide receiver – and Ohio State legend – Cris Carter: "All he does is catch touchdowns."

In that spirit, you could change it for Del Bel Belluz and say, all he does is score goals.

The 21-year-old center tallied in his NHL debut a season ago for the Blue Jackets in his lone game, and he's now 2-for-2 after scoring in his first game this year Thursday night. That makes him the first player in franchise history to score in each of his first two NHL games.

This one was scored the way he said he's notched many of his 17 tallies down in Cleveland – from the hard area of the ice. Del Bel Belluz said before the game his increased output in his sophomore pro season has come from a focus on getting inside the defense and into goal-scoring areas, and he

converted against Seattle from the top of the crease when he deflected home van Riemsdyk's centering pass.

"That was just an example of it," Del Bel Belluz said. "Just a grindy, greasy goal. JVR just backhanded it to the net there and I was lucky enough to get a stick on it, and it found its way past the line."

Head coach Dean Evason said last week that Del Bel Belluz's play, both offensively and defensively, was deserving of a call-up but the Blue Jackets didn't have an open spot in the lineup. That came Thursday, with centers Sean Monahan (upper body injury) and Cole Sillinger (illness) out of the lineup, and Del Bel Belluz showed just how he earned that recall with his play against the Kraken.

He was on the ice for Seattle's first goal – Shane Wright knocked down his clearing attempt and quickly fed Eeli Tolvanen for a one-timer home – but that was the lone blemish on his record. Del Bel Belluz played 11:16, added an assist on Mateychuk's goal, won 7 of 13 faceoffs and centered what might have been the team's best line with van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson.

This appears likely to be his first extended look in the NHL, and Del Bel Belluz aced his initial test.

"He didn't cheat the game," Evason said. "He was on for that one goal (for Seattle) - tried to do the right thing and chip it out, their guy gets a good stick on it – but as far as the way he competed and his attention to detail, his skill-set is really good, but he has to play in all areas of the game to help his team have success."

3. The CBJ leaders did their thing on and off the ice today.

While much of this night was about the kids – and we'll group 27-year-old Owen Sillinger in that as he made his NHL debut (more on him tomorrow) – the team's veterans did their part as well. Zach Werenski had a goal and an assist, van Riemsdyk had the two helpers, Sean Kuraly opened the scoring and Kirill Marchenko notched his team-best 18th goal.

But perhaps their biggest contribution came before the game in the way they welcomed the new blood to the locker room. Del Bel Belluz and Sillinger are no strangers to the team, having been in training camps and around the organization for a while, but both said they were struck by how comfortable they felt upon arrival at Nationwide Arena.

"Right when I walked into the locker room, I saw everyone's smile on their face, how welcoming they were," Sillinger said. "They said, 'We're going to have a good one tonight.'"

"All the guys made it so easy for me. They were just very welcoming," Del Bel Belluz said.

It might sound like a small thing, but it goes a long way. The Blue Jackets continue to surprise the hockey world with their play, and one of the keys to the success has been just how tight-knit the locker room is and how good the team's chemistry has been.

If you're going to do something special in the NHL, you have to have it, and the Blue Jackets do.

## [BlueJackets.com / Jackets hold off Blues for 4th straight win](#)

By Lou Korac- January 11, 2025

ST. LOUIS -- Jet Greaves made 31 saves for the Columbus Blue Jackets, who extended their winning streak to a season-high four games with a 2-1 victory against the St. Louis Blues at Enterprise Center on Saturday.

Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger scored for the Blue Jackets (20-17-6), who are 8-2-1 in their past 11 games. They had 23 blocked shots.

"It's a team game," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "Everybody's buying in to do the right things to keep the puck out of the net. We've talked a lot about our road record (6-12-3) and getting out here. We did a lot of really good things too, playing a sound defensive hockey game. Unfortunate we didn't keep it out at the end, but we did a lot of really good things to keep it out for the majority of the hockey game."

Greaves came within 11 seconds of his first NHL shutout, but Colton Parayko made it 2-1 on the power play with St. Louis at 6-on-4 after goalie Jordan Binnington was pulled for the extra attacker.

"I felt comfortable," Greaves said. "... I'm just trying to stay in the moment as much as I can and just take it one play or one shot at a time. For me, I'm just trying to stay present.

"At the end of the day, you want to play well, but more than anything, you want to win hockey games. That's what it's about, that's what we care about."

Binnington made 28 saves for the Blues (20-20-4), who have lost three of four.

"The lack of urgency in our group is what's hurting us in our consistency," St. Louis coach Jim Montgomery said. "You look at the way we came out against Anaheim (in a 6-2 win on Thursday), there was a direct purpose to what we were doing. Tonight there was not. It was wait and see. And that urgency [of] us fearing losing is something that's got to become part of our fiber if we want to get to the consistent level we want to be at."

Fantilli gave Columbus a 1-0 lead at 15:38 of the first period. Kirill Marchenko found him open in front with a pass from the right face-off circle, and Fantilli scored around Binnington.

"I thought [Marchenko] was shooting it," Fantilli said. "I know when he has the puck in those areas, I have to be ready for it because he could be faking it and he could be slipping it. I've just got to stay ready in there and it ended up coming. The fake was so good that Binnington wasn't in the net there and it worked out."

Sillinger made it 2-0 with a power-play goal at 16:51 of the second period. He scored with a one-timer from in close off James van Riemsdyk's pass from behind the net.

"To make it 2-0 going into the third period, going out to a two-goal lead was key," Sillinger said.

Parayko's goal prevented the Blues from getting shut out for the first time this season, but it wasn't enough.

"We got [out] to a great start last game and kind of set the tone for the whole game," St. Louis center Robert Thomas said. "We weren't able to do that tonight and it's frustrating. We need to find a way to be consistent for the whole 60 minutes. It's hard fighting back when you're down. We had some good pushes but weren't able to score. Just got to come out stronger."

NOTES: Fantilli has six points (three goals, three assists) in a career-high five-game point streak. ... Marchenko (assist) has five points (two goals, three assists) in a four-game point streak and 20 points (eight goals, 12 assists) in his past 14 games. ... Blue Jackets forward Dmitri Voronkov (assist) has six points (four goals, two assists) in a four-game point streak and 18 points (10 goals, eight assists) in his past 13 games. ... Blues defenseman Ryan Suter played his 1,488th game, passing Wayne Gretzky for 24th on the NHL list. He had 17:36 of ice time. ... St. Louis had scored four or more goals in five straight games.

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets, Greaves take down Blues](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- January 12, 2025

After CBJ wins, we'll give three takeaways about what stood out or what we'll remember from the Blue Jackets victory.

RECAP: BLUE JACKETS 2, BLUES 1

1. Jet Greaves delivered another standout performance in net for the Blue Jackets.

Whenever Columbus has turned to the netminder over the past three seasons, he's always delivered, but this showing in St. Louis was perhaps the best of his NHL career.

Greaves turned aside nine shots in the first period, eight more in the second and 14 in the third to earn his fifth career win and second of the season. He finished just 12 seconds short of his first career shutout only to see it spoiled when Colton Parayko got a rebound by him on the power play, but the Blue Jackets and Greaves were able to play out the final seconds to complete the victory.

It seemed clear Greaves was on his game from the early going, and that continued on as the Blues got better throughout the game. St. Louis finished with numerous grade-A chances – including a second-period one-on-one chance for Brandon Saad and a third-period open look for Philip Broberg – only to see Greaves answer each time.

"Jet was a real solid tonight, real calm back there, made some huge saves for us," Cole Sillinger said.

"Jet stood on his head tonight," Adam Fantilli said. "He was great. We wish could have gotten the shutout for him there with 10 seconds left, but he's awesome. Any time he's up here, he has a sense of confidence back there, and he's been playing great."

The praise was extensive from his teammates, but for Greaves, it just felt like another day at the office. His growth into the NHL goalie the past couple of seasons has largely stemmed from bringing consistent effort and performance on a daily basis and staying in the moment, and those are the things he leaned into as the saves started to pile up.

"I never really think about it so much," Greaves said. "I'm just trying to stay in the moment as much as I can and just take it one play or one shot at a time. So for me, I'm just trying to be present. It's kind of tough to say."

He was all that and more, and the only disappointment for some might have come from the fact that Parayko's goal denied him the shutout, but Greaves said coming out with the win was much more important.

"At the end of the day, you want to play well, but more than anything you want to win hockey games," Greaves said. "That's what it's about."

2. The Blue Jackets helped Greaves by putting the body on the line.

As head coach Dean Evason spoke to the media Friday morning, he extolled the virtues of his team's increasing dedication of blocking shots.

His players weren't in the room, but it sure felt like they were listening Saturday night (or, more likely, he's had the same conversation with them as he had with us). The Blue Jackets blocked 23 shots in St. Louis, reaching that number for the fourth straight game, with Dante Fabbro leading the way with seven and Ivan Provorov right behind with five.

“That shows commitment from your group to keep the puck out of the net,” Evason said.

Not that it’s always easy. The Blue Jackets did lose forward Zach Aston-Reese in the third period after a shot block, but that can be the price of doing the little things to win a game. It might not be fun, but getting in the way of shots is certainly necessary.

“I mean, it sucks,” Fantilli said of blocking shots. “It’s a sacrifice. It hurts, but it helps us get wins. No one wants to do it, but the guys that do it and do it well, that’s going to help our team a lot.”

Greaves was certainly thankful afterward, as the Blues pushed for more offense as the contest went on but rarely found an easy path to the net.

“That’s something that’s huge for us to have success is blocking shots,” the goalie said. “I think the guys did a great job of putting their bodies on the line to help the team.”

3. The team’s second road win in a row couldn’t have come at a better time.

The Blue Jackets’ victory was their fourth in a row and eighth in 11 games, and it moved the team into sole possession of the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

This is a real playoff race at the moment, and if you’re going to make it to the postseason, you have to win games in a variety of ways. And as most CBJ fans know, there’s been a major dichotomy between the team’s home and road records this season.

Columbus has been one of the best teams in the NHL at home this year, moving to 14-5-3 with Thursday’s win vs. Seattle and boasting the most prolific home goal-scoring record in the league.

The road has been a different story, as the Blue Jackets entered Saturday night’s game vs. the Blues tied for last in the NHL with just five wins (5-12-3) away from home. That simply isn’t good enough for a team with high hopes, and the Blue Jackets took to the ice knowing it.

“Obviously, I talked to you guys about our road record, and they take pride in that too, right?” Evason said of his players. “They don’t want to have the road record be what it is, so they’re competing their butts off to try to win hockey games out here.”

On the road, the goals haven’t – and won’t – come as easily as they have at Nationwide Arena, so the Blue Jackets have to be able to bear down and play enough defense to get wins. On this night, they did that in the shadow of the Gateway Arch.

“It was just kind of a greasy 2-1 road win,” Sillinger said. “We talked about being better on the road and being able to win hockey games like that, and that was a big one for our group.”



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Sweep Season Series From Blues Behind Greaves' Brilliance

By Mark Scheig- January 11, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets hadn't won four games in a row since February 2022. Saturday night in St. Louis, they achieved their first four-game winning streak since.

Jet Greaves made 31 saves and was just 10.5 seconds away from his first NHL shutout. Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger provided the offense to help the Blue Jackets to a 2-1 win over the St. Louis Blues. With the win, the Blue Jackets have swept the two-game series from the Blues in 2024-25.

Saturday night's win was a total team effort.

### Game Recap

The Blue Jackets had their legs early. They played a fast game and utilized their forecheck. It led directly to the opening goal of the game.

Dmitri Voronkov checked his man into the boards and forced a turnover. He got the puck to Kirill Marchenko who then made a brilliant pass to Fantilli. Fantilli was able to deposit the puck into the wide-open side of the net.

There were stretches of the game with few whistles. Both teams played with speed and purpose. But it was the shot blocking of the Blue Jackets and making the simple play that was the difference that led them to victory.

Late in the second period, the Blue Jackets were able to double their lead on the power play. Sillinger was able to beat Jordan Binnington on a great pass by James van Riemsdyk. Luca Del Bel Belluz kept the play alive behind the net to allow van Riemsdyk to get the puck. With the assist, Del Bel Belluz recorded a point in his first three NHL games. He became the second Blue Jackets to do this joining Zach Werenski who did it in four straight in 2016-17.

The third period belonged to the Blues in an effort to tie the game. They outshot the Blue Jackets 15-4 in the third period. Despite the push, Dean Evason said postgame the bench stayed calm throughout. Greaves was able to stop everything except for Colton Parayko's power-play goal with 10.5 seconds left.

Saturday night's win was a total team effort. The Blue Jackets got timely scoring from their young core in Fantilli and Sillinger. They got strong defensive play especially in the first 40 minutes. Shots on goal were 26-17 Blue Jackets after two. They also got Greaves' best NHL game to date.

The stat of the night were the blocked shots. The Blue Jackets blocked 23 shots in their winning effort. They were also able to stifle at the Blues at times with their sticks and positioning.

Here's Fantilli postgame on playing tight games. "We're going well when we get there. We've got experience with them. When we do have those types of close games, I think Dean's doing a good job of getting us prepared to play the right structure and play the right way."

The Blue Jackets now head home for a Tuesday date with the Philadelphia Flyers. Meanwhile, the Blues continue their four-game homestand with a game on Tuesday night against the Calgary Flames.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Finding Silver-Lining Despite Monahan Injury

**By William Espy- January 12, 2025**

During their game against the Pittsburgh Penguins this past Tuesday, the Columbus Blue Jackets lost one of their key players, Sean Monahan.

Early in the third period of the game, Monahan left the bench with an upper-body injury and did not return. He was placed on the injured reserve on Thursday morning ahead of the Blue Jackets game against the Seattle Kraken.

Monahan has been a big part of the reason that the Blue Jackets have massively exceeded expectations this season, and losing him for a significant amount of time seemed like it could drastically hurt their playoff chances, but that hasn't been the case and there could even be a silver lining to an otherwise unfortunate situation.

### Injury History

Monahan has missed a considerable amount of time throughout his career due to injury. He's always been a high-performing player, minus a couple of disappointing seasons at the end of his stint with the Calgary Flames, but he's continuously struggled to stay healthy for a full season.

After a season-ending groin injury during the 2022-23 season, it seemed that Monahan's durability had improved significantly. He played 83 games during the 2023-24 season after being traded from the Montreal Canadiens to the Winnipeg Jets. His health has held up well this season to this point as well, as he had played all 41 games prior to his current wrist injury.

### Monahan's Season-to-Date

In his first season with Columbus, Monahan has established himself as their top-line center alongside Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko. All three were hovering around a point-per-game pace when Monahan went down with injury. The line has been a big part of the team's offensive production, as they're very close to leading the team in individual point production, trailing only star defenseman Zach Werenski.

While the line has been heavily praised for its offensive capabilities, one thing that goes under the radar is the fact that it tends to draw some very difficult defensive responsibilities as well. Early in the season, when the Toronto Maple Leafs visited Nationwide Arena, Monahan was tasked with playing against Auston Matthews. As the season has progressed, head coach Dean Evason has started passing some of the top stars off to others though.

Against the Pittsburgh Penguins at home, for example, Monahan was the center tasked with defending Evgeni Malkin more often than not. The fourth line of Zach Aston-Reese, Sean Kuraly, and Kevin Labanc was matched up against Sidney Crosby. Against the New Jersey Devils, Monahan was given the task of shutting down an offensive line and spent most of his night against Jack Hughes, while the fourth line took care of the more defensive-minded Nico Hischier.

### Moving Forward

The Blue Jackets had Adam Fantilli step into Monahan's role with the veteran out of the lineup against the Kraken on Thursday night and again against the St. Louis Blues on Saturday night. He played well overall, and the opportunity seemed to give him a spark offensively. The second-year center, who entered Tuesday's game with nine goals and 10 assists, recorded a helper on Werenski's goal, which

extended the Blue Jackets' lead to 3-1. He then went on to open the scoring against the Blues, netting his tenth goal of the season.

Fantilli certainly hasn't looked out of place on the top line, and the organization will certainly hope that this gives him a long-term bump. While the Blue Jackets would undoubtedly hope to have Monahan back in the lineup as soon as possible, if Fantilli can get his offensive production rolling consistently, there could be some good that comes out of an unfortunate situation.

Monahan is going to be out of the lineup for at least a week, and while there is the chance that his injury has a negative effect on the team's playoff push, the Blue Jackets didn't seem to have any issues against the Kraken or the Blues.

While it's not easy to have their top center on the shelf, the Blue Jackets have made the most out of their games without him so far. He'll also miss their next game against the Philadelphia Flyers, a matchup that could have major playoff implications in the long run.

The sooner the Blue Jackets can get Monahan back on their first line, the more realistic their fight for the postseason will be. Meanwhile, it's up to those around him to step up and show their value to the team and Fantilli in particular has done just that.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Kids Take Over, Werenski Stretches Streak To 16, Home Ice Mastery

**By Will Chase- January 11, 2025**

It's starting to feel nearly automatic at home.

Zach Werenski had two points with a goal and an assist to continue a 16-game home points streak as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the Seattle Kraken 6-2 Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

### Kids Take Over

We've heard about the kids and the prospects for quite a while. They're really starting to make an impact.

Denton Mateychuk scored his first career NHL goal at 12:27 of the second period to give the Blue Jackets a 4-1 lead, all part of a four-goal second period. James van Riemsdyk (8) had the second of two assists on the night and Luca Del Bel Belluz picked up his first assist in his season debut.

Speaking of Del Bel Belluz, he scored his first goal of the season at 3:29 of the period, which gave Columbus the 2-1 lead at the time. van Riemsdyk had his first assist of the night and Damon Severson, back in the lineup after being a healthy scratch for the last two games, picked up his 12th assist.

In what was Del Bel Belluz's second career game, also featured his second career goal. He scored his first career goal in his NHL debut last season.

For good measure, and a veteran by comparison, Kent Johnson scored the fourth goal of the frame to give Columbus the 5-1 lead at 15:45. Werenski — much more on him to come — picked up the assist (35) as did Dante Fabbro (7).

A Sillinger made his NHL debut Thursday. Following in the footsteps of father and former Blue Jackets captain Mike Sillinger, and brother Cole Sillinger, Owen Sillinger finally cracked his first NHL lineup, taking the place of brother Cole who was out with an illness.

The 27-year-old center from Bemidji State University had 25 points (eight goals, 17 assists) for the Cleveland Monsters this season. He played 192 career games for the Monsters.

Philipp Grubauer was pulled after the fifth goal and finished with 14 saves on 19 shots. Joey Daccord made four saves in relief.

### Werenski Stretches Streak To 16

Werenski had another multi-point effort with his 13th goal of the night at 10:53 of the second period to give the Jackets a 3-1 lead. Adam Fantilli (11) and Dmitri Voronkov (12) picked up the assists as both extended point streaks. Fantilli has two goals and three assists over a four-game point streak. Voronkov has four goals and one assist over a three-game point streak.

Werenski's two points extended his home point streak to 16 games (10 goals, 30 assists).

Werenski leads the team with 48 points and 35 assists.

### Home Ice Mastery

The Blue Jackets are one of the best teams on home ice, with a home record of 14-5-3. They're also one of the best-scoring teams in the league (3.43 GF/GP) in a variety of categories and the best at scoring goals at Nationwide Arena (4.18). They lead the league with 62 5v5 goals at home.

Columbus has scored six goals in a game 10 times this season.

Elvis Merzlikins made 29 saves on 31 shots in his fifth consecutive start. He's won three in a row and five of his last six starts.

#### Back On The Road

The yo-yo schedule continues as the Blue Jackets head back on the road to take on the St. Louis Blues on Saturday, Jan. 11 at 7 p.m. ET from Enterprise Center.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / CBJ 2, STL 1: Greaves Nearly Perfect As Blue Jackets Defeat Blues, Pick Up Fourth Straight Win

**By Ed Francis- January 11, 2025**

Jet Greaves was 10.5 seconds away from a shutout in what was undoubtedly the best start of his young NHL career and the Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the St. Louis Blues by a final of 2-1 Saturday night.

The win was Columbus' fourth straight, something they last accomplished in February 2022. And for just the second time this season, the Blue Jackets have won two in a row on the road.

It was an outstanding start for Greaves, just his fifth of the season and 15th of his NHL career. He made big saves in all three periods, keeping the game scoreless early, maintaining the lead in the middle, and preserving the lead late.

As he's developing a knack for doing, Greaves gave the credit to his teammates.

"I thought the guys were great in front of me," said Greaves. "They did a really good job of clearing out the second chances, boxing out. Special teams were really good as well."

"I thought it was a great team effort."

Head coach Dean Evason echoed a similar sentiment.

"It's a team game, and everybody is buying in to do the right things to keep the puck out of the net," said Evason.

Adam Fantilli got the scoring started late in the first period, reaching double-digit goals on the season and extending his point streak to five games.

The assists on Fantilli's 10th of the season came from Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko, who have been centered by the second-year player the last two games after Sean Monahan went out with a wrist injury in Tuesday's win over the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Cole Sillinger gave the Blue Jackets a 2-0 lead late in the second period with a power-play goal, taking a great feed from James van Riemsdyk and beating St. Louis goaltender Jordan Binnington.

It was the seventh time in the last nine games that Columbus scored while on the power play.

St. Louis' only goal of the game would come when they had a two-man advantage, one as a result of a Zach Werenski penalty, and the other as the Blues had pulled Binnington to give them an extra attacker.

Zach Aston-Reese left the game early in the third period after taking a puck to the mid-section. He would not return, and the team is calling it an upper-body injury.

The win moves Columbus to 20-17-6 on the season and into a tie with the Tampa Bay Lightning for the first of two wild card spots. The Lightning have played four fewer games than Columbus.

Here's the details from a Saturday night in St. Louis:

1st Period:

(15:38 — CBJ Goal): This was a brilliant play by all three players who got a point on the goal. It starts with Voronkov, who gets the secondary assist and starts the goal-scoring sequence by shaking off a pair of Blues' defenders and then working the puck to Marchenko near the face-off dot to the left of Binnington. Two Blues defenseman converge on him, and Fantilli sneaks behind them and takes a great feed from

Marchenko right in front of the net. Binnington, thinking Marchenko's pass was a shot, is out of position and Fantilli is able to bury it with ease.

"The fake was so good (from Marchenko) that Binnington wasn't really in the net," said Fantilli.

### 2nd Period

(16:51 — CBJ PP Goal): It's a power-play goal for the Blue Jackets to make it 2-0 with just over three minutes left in the period. Sillinger picks up his seventh goal of the season after Columbus' second unit gets the Blues defense all out of sorts — especially van Riemsdyk. He pulls two St. Louis defensemen behind the net and while he's doing that, Sillinger is calling for the puck in the low slot; van Riemsdyk gets it his way and Sillinger puts it past Binnington to double the Columbus lead.

### 3rd Period

(19:50): The Blues get on the scoreboard but it's too little, too late. With Werenski in the box for a tripping penalty, Colton Parayko gets a power-play goal to give St. Louis a temporary glimmer of hope before the clock would run out.

CBJ	GAME STATS	STL
30	SHOTS	32
47%	FACEOFFS	53%
1/2	POWER PLAY	1/3
2/3	PENALTY KILL	1/2
14	HITS	22
8	GIVEAWAYS	19
3	TAKEAWAYS	4
23	BLOCKED SHOTS	10
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
1.67	EXPECTED GOALS	2.26

CBJ	GAME STATS	STL
42	SHOT ATTEMPTS	61
17	SCORING CHANCES	32
12	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	5

Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com

Stat Chat:

- Luca Del Bel Belluz had the secondary assist on the Sillinger goal. In his first three games (two this season and one last season), LDBB had two goals and two assists.
- Werenski was held off the scoresheet for the 13th time this season. Before the game, he had the same number of multi-point games (12) as he did games without a point.
- The 1.67 expected goals from the Blue Jackets was their lowest in a victory this season. The previous low in a win was 1.88 in a 5-1 victory over the Boston Bruins on November 18th.

Up Next:

After the quick trip to St. Louis, the Blue Jackets come right back to Columbus for a pair of home games: Tuesday against the Philadelphia Flyers and Thursday against the San Jose Sharks. Both games will start at 7 p.m.



## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Greaves Nearly Perfect, Adam Fantilli's Streaking, Cole Sillinger's Game-Winner

By Will Chase- January 12, 2025

They're officially on fire.

Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger each scored goals and Jet Greaves was perfect before losing his first career shutout bid with 12 seconds left as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the St. Louis Blues 2-1 on Saturday night from Enterprise Center.

The Blue Jackets have won a season-high four straight games and won consecutive road games for the first time this season.

### Greaves Nearly Perfect

How good has Greaves been?

The 23-year-old improved to 2-1-2 on the season after Saturday's victory in which he came seconds from his first career shutout before Colton Parayko's (8) power-play goal — Zack Bolduc (10) Justin Faulk (14) — at 19:48 broke the bid. Bolduc is on a three-game point streak (zero goals, three assists).

In five NHL starts this season, Greaves has a 2.98 goals against average and a .906 save percentage. He was recently named AHL Player of the Week after going 3-0-1 with a 0.98 GAA, .971 SV%, and one shutout for the Cleveland Monsters.

Greaves was the First Star of the Night on Saturday.

### Adam Fantilli's Streaking

Fantilli's (10) goal — Kirill Marchenko (29), Dmitri Voronkov (13) — at 15:38 of the first period started the scoring in the game.

Fantilli is on a career-high five-game point streak (three goals, three assists). Voronkov is on a four-game point streak (four goals, two assists). Fantilli had a game-high six shots on goal.

### Cole Sillinger's Game-Winner

Cole Sillinger's (7) power-play goal — James van Riemsdyk (9), Luca Del Bel Belluz (2) — at 16:51 of the second period extended the Blue Jackets' 2-0 lead.

Columbus is 20-17-6 on the season and in fourth place in the Metropolitan Division. They're 8-2-1 in the last 11 games and hold a two-point lead for second in the Eastern Conference wild card, trailing the Boston Bruins by one point for the first spot. They came into Saturday's game on their best run since 2022.

The Jackets' scoring differential is -2. Dante Fabbro had a game-high seven blocked shots, and Columbus had 23 for the game.

### Flyers Rematch

The Blue Jackets return home on Tuesday, Jan. 14, to face the Philadelphia Flyers for the third time. Philadelphia has won the prior two meetings. Puck drop is at 7 p.m. ET.

## The Athletic / Which 4 Nations snubs are making the best cases to be injury subs?

By Chris Johnston- January 11, 2025

Missing out on an invitation to next month's 4 Nations Face-Off may have provided an extra shot of motivation.

Consider that the top six Canadian goal scorers since Don Sweeney's management team finalized its roster picks are players who were not among those given a roster spot in early December: Jordan Kyrou (12), Mark Scheifele (11), John Tavares (10), Zach Hyman (10), Jonathan Marchessault (10) and Gabriel Vilardi (10).

That underlines why having such an early roster deadline for the Feb. 12-20 tournament isn't particularly conducive to identifying the players in the best form for the event.

It also illustrates the depth of Canada's player pool.

But here's the carrot still dangling in front of the Finns, Swedes, Canadians and Americans initially passed over: The tryouts effectively continue. Injury replacements are permitted right up until the tournament begins. And the management teams are still monitoring the progress of potential replacements.

With that in mind, we've dug deep on how things have gone for each country's crop of players since the 4 Nations rosters were finalized on Dec. 2, with an eye on identifying those playing their way onto the radar.

No consideration was given to specific roles or fits. This exercise was simply about highlighting the snubs building the strongest case with their recent play.

Finland

Current roster

(Note: Highlighted players were named to the roster as "first six" selections.)

As of now, the Finns appear to be the country most likely to need at least one injury fill-in. Jani Hakanpää hasn't played since the team was announced, and he's managed to skate in only four games all season because of lingering knee troubles. Another player to monitor closely is Erik Haula, who recently sprained his ankle and is expected to be sidelined for a couple of weeks. Patrik Laine missed a couple of games due to illness this week, but that does not seem to be a long-term issue.

Next-up forward: Joel Kiviranta

Not only does he have the most goals (six) and points (nine) among snubs since the team was selected, but he's got built-in familiarity with Colorado Avalanche teammates Artturi Lehkonen and Mikko Rantanen. Kiviranta plays the kind of reliable 200-foot game a Finnish coach demands, and he's delivered strong play-driving metrics this season. While he doesn't produce a ton offensively, he's shown a knack for scoring the big goal in the past.

The next next man: Eeli Tolvanen

Next-up defenseman: Urho Vaakanainen

One of just 10 Finnish defensemen to play an NHL game this season, Vaakanainen has emerged as a potential replacement option since landing with the New York Rangers as part of the Jacob Trouba trade

on Dec. 8. He was seldom-used in Anaheim before the deal but is now logging 15 minutes per night with the Rangers. Vaakanainen is handling regular penalty-killing duty there, too.

The next next man: Henri Jokiharju

Next-up goalie: Justus Annunen

Another player who benefited from an in-season trade, Annunen has performed exceptionally well playing behind countryman Juuse Saros in Nashville after a rough start to the season in Colorado. He's compiled a 3-2-0 record with a .930 save percentage since the Finnish team was initially selected. Annunen would be an easy call if the Finns need to replace a goaltender.

The next next man: Joonas Korpisalo.

Sweden

Current roster

(Note: Highlighted players were named to the roster as "first six" selections.)

The biggest ongoing injury situation in the Swedish camp surrounds goaltender Linus Ullmark, who has been unable to even take the ice for practice since before Christmas because of a back issue. Elias Pettersson has been out of Vancouver's lineup since the holidays with an undisclosed ailment but appears to be on the verge of a return. Rasmus Dahlin (back) and Joel Eriksson Ek (lower body) are playing again after injury absences. Their statuses are worth monitoring closely in case of a setback.

Next-up forward: Rickard Rakell

Rakell has been red hot since early December, scoring 11 goals and 21 points in 17 games for the Pittsburgh Penguins. No Swede has produced more during that time. Most of that offense has come at even strength for the opportunistic finisher, which should only boost his case if another forward is needed.

The next next man: Mikael Backlund

Next-up defenseman: Oliver Ekman-Larsson

A Stanley Cup winner last season in Florida, OEL's career renaissance is continuing in Toronto. He has the fourth-highest total of even-strength points (six) among Swedish defensemen since the 4 Nations roster was selected, and he's delivering strong two-way results while logging more than 20 minutes per night.

The next next man: Adam Larsson

Next-up goalie: Arvid Söderblom

Söderblom's numbers may not sparkle playing behind a bad Chicago Blackhawks team, but it's telling that he has the second-most appearances among all Swedish goalies since the 4 Nations roster was selected. Those regular reps could be useful in the event he needed to be thrown into competition. And he's certainly been holding his own with a 5-6-0 record and .893 save percentage.

The next next man: Samuel Ersson

Canada

Current roster

(Note: Highlighted players were named to the roster as "first six" selections.)

Knock wood, this group remains incredibly healthy. Josh Morrissey left a Winnipeg Jets game this week after losing his footing and crashing into his own net, but he seems to have avoided a significant injury. Beyond that, there's nothing currently on the radar.

Next-up forward: Mark Scheifele

The Jets center had already built a pretty compelling case for inclusion in the original roster and he hasn't slowed down since enduring the disappointment of being left off. Scheifele has compiled 11 goals and 22 points in his past 17 games — matching Sidney Crosby's point total over the same stretch. That's among the best of any Canadian skater in the NHL during that time.

The next next man: Robert Thomas

Next-up defenseman: Vince Dunn

It's been a rough go of late for the Seattle Kraken, but that hasn't kept Dunn from producing elite numbers in a difficult situation. Only Cale Makar (17) and Josh Morrissey (16) have eclipsed Dunn's 15 points since the Canadian roster was finalized, and both of those players have already booked their tickets to the 4 Nations Face-Off. Dunn has exploded for seven goals in his past 17 games.

The next next man: Evan Bouchard

Next-up goalie: Mackenzie Blackwood

Blackwood has unquestionably had the best form of any Canadian goaltender since the 4 Nations roster was picked. He's delivered a sparkling .938 save percentage in 13 appearances — going 9-2-1 for a Colorado Avalanche team that was compelled to sign him to a five-year contract extension almost immediately after acquiring him from the San Jose Sharks in a trade. Blackwood has played so well that there's a case to give him starts if an injury opens the door for him to be added to the roster.

The next next man: Logan Thompson

United States

Current roster

(Note: Highlighted players were named to the roster as "first six" selections.)

The biggest points of concern are Brock Faber and Chris Kreider, who are both currently sidelined with upper-body injuries. Kreider has battled through back issues this season and last played on Jan 4. Team USA is also closely monitoring the status of Auston Matthews, who endured two significant injury absences this season with an undisclosed ailment but has looked good since returning to the Toronto Maple Leafs lineup last weekend.

Next-up forward: Jason Robertson

The top-scoring American snub since the rosters were finalized, Robertson finally seems to have emerged from a sleepy start to the season. He's got 20 points to show for his past 17 games in Dallas. He's also generated more than 2.5 shots per game during that stretch, which is more in line with what we've seen from him during his most productive NHL seasons.

The next next man: Clayton Keller

Next-up defenseman: John Carlson

Leaving the veteran stalwart off the initial roster was one of the more difficult calls management had to make, but his performance hasn't wavered since receiving the news. Carlson has logged more than 23

minutes per night for the Eastern Conference-leading Capitals since early December while delivering an expected goals mark of 58 percent at even strength.

The next next man: Neal Pionk

Next-up goalie: John Gibson

The veteran is quietly having a bounce-back season — putting together a .912 save percentage since early December while seeing regular action for the Anaheim Ducks. Gibson represented his country on numerous occasions earlier in his career and played for Team North America at the 2016 World Cup. He gets the nod here over some up-and-comers who have also played well. The U.S. currently enjoys an embarrassment of riches at the position.

The next next man: Joseph Woll

## The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: A new No. 1 at the midpoint and players who need to step up

**By Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn- January 11, 2025**

The Rankings Boys are back in town after a two-week holiday hiatus — just in time for the midway point of the NHL season.

The middle of the season offers a great chance to reflect on what’s happened to date and look ahead to what could happen next. For some players, that means putting their best foot forward after a slow or disappointing first half.

That’s what this week’s theme is all about: players who need to step up in the final 41(ish) games.

### 1. Vegas Golden Knights, 28-10-3

Dec. 20 rank: 2

Sean’s ranking: 1

Dom’s ranking: 1

It’s hard to pick a player who needs to “step up” on the league’s best team. The Golden Knights are where they are because the entire roster has been completely dialed in through the first half of the season. If we have to pick one, though, we will go with Nicolas Roy. He’s finally getting a bigger role after playing some incredibly effective hockey in a sheltered role, but the transition hasn’t been seamless. He’s struggled defensively higher up the lineup and could stand to clean things up.

### 2. Washington Capitals, 27-10-4

Dec. 20 rank: 1

Sean’s ranking: 2

Dom’s ranking: 2

On one hand, Andrew Mangiapane deserves credit for what he’s brought to Washington’s lineup; he’s scoring at a 20-goal pace, and the Capitals are decisively winning his minutes. None of their forwards has been on the ice for fewer expected goals per 60.

That said, imagine how the Caps would look if Mangiapane channeled the 2021-22 version of himself when he scored 35 goals for the Flames and forced his way into the Team Canada discussion. Seriously, if NHL players went to the 2022 Olympics, he might’ve been on the plane.

### 3. Dallas Stars, 26-13-1

Dec. 20 rank: 12

Sean’s ranking: 3

Dom’s ranking: 3

Logan Stankoven started the season red-hot with 14 points in his first 15 games. He has just five in the 23 games since. If Dallas’ claim to fame is its forward depth, those kinds of slumps are inexcusable. Stankoven needs to find more consistency in the second half — he’s too good to go that cold for that long.

#### 4. Toronto Maple Leafs, 27-14-2

Dec. 20 rank: 4

Sean's ranking: 4

Dom's ranking: 5

The bar for Auston Matthews is extremely high. At his best, he's a perennial MVP candidate who scores at will and dominates at both ends of the ice. Suffice to say, that version of Matthews hasn't shown up much this season as he played through injury through much of the first half. Matthews has looked a lot better since returning, and the Leafs will need him to keep that up in the second half. A first-ever Atlantic Division title is on the line.

#### 5. Edmonton Oilers, 25-13-3

Dec. 20 rank: 10

Sean's ranking: 5

Dom's ranking: 4

It was always going to be tough for Jeff Skinner to get back to the 60-point range in Edmonton without prime power-play time. A spot in the top six next to one of the two best players in the world should've helped make up some of the difference, but it was hard to trust Skinner that high up in the lineup. For the season, he has just 15 points in 39 games, a far cry from the 50-point pace many were expecting.

#### 6. Colorado Avalanche, 26-16-1

Dec. 20 rank: 16

Sean's ranking: 6

Dom's ranking: 6

When Colorado acquired Casey Mittelstadt last spring, the thought was that they'd added a quality depth piece for the foreseeable future. That's ... not what they've gotten. Mittelstadt has scored twice since Halloween, taken a step back as a playmaker — at one point going 18 games without a five-on-five assist — and posted an atrocious 44.7 expected goal rate. He's got to do more.

#### 7. Winnipeg Jets, 28-12-2

Dec. 20 rank: 9

Sean's ranking: 7

Dom's ranking: 7

Overall, Cole Perfetti's numbers aren't great — with top-six minutes and a decent bit of power-play run, he should probably have more than 23 points in 42 games. The rate stats aren't pretty, either, with 1.34 points per 60 at five-on-five.

It gets worse, though, when you consider that he scored nine of those 23 points in a five-game cluster back in October. For a contender, the Jets (as always) are a little short on playmakers. More from Perfetti would go a long way.

#### 8. Los Angeles Kings, 23-10-5

Dec. 20 rank: 11

Sean's ranking:

Dom's ranking: 8

The Kings are paying Kevin Fiala good money — \$7.87 million against the cap — to do a little more than produce 1.97 five-on-five points per 60. That puts him with the Jesper Boqvists and Ross Coltons of the world; solid players, but nobody's idea of top-six difference-makers. L.A. looks a lot more like a legit contender if Fiala reverts to form.

9. Florida Panthers, 25-15-2

Dec. 20 rank: 3

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 9

Sergei Bobrovsky has been good of late, with a .940 save percentage over his last six starts, but his body of work this season has been average — really, a .903 save percentage and 1.52 goals saved above expected is about as average as a goalie can get. Backup Spencer Knight (.891, minus-1.06 GSAx) has been worse. Florida doesn't need those guys to be great, but it'd be nice to get a more consistent cushion.

10. Carolina Hurricanes, 25-15-2

Dec. 20 rank: 5

Sean's ranking: 10

Dom's ranking: 10

At some point, we're going to have to accept that Andrei Svechnikov is never going to be a franchise scorer. Even with those lowered expectations in mind, however, his output this year has still been disappointing. Svechnikov is scoring at just a 59-point pace. That's probably more bad luck than anything, but that still means Svechnikov needs to execute better.

11. Tampa Bay Lightning, 22-15-2

Dec. 20 rank: 6

Sean's ranking: 11

Dom's ranking: 11

Tampa Bay's top half might be the scariest in the league, but that doesn't mean the Lightning aren't without their vulnerabilities. That bottom half? Hoo boy, is it scary in a whole other way.

That was to be expected going into the season. Still, there's room for players to step up. In particular, the third pair, Emil Lilleberg and Nick Perbix, has looked rough despite playing some of the league's cushiest minutes.

12. Minnesota Wild, 26-12-4

Dec. 20 rank: 7

Sean's ranking: 13

Dom's ranking: 12



As a two-way force, Joel Eriksson Ek looks as good as ever. His five-on-five numbers continue to be excellent at both ends of the ice.

What's made Eriksson Ek a legit top-line center in recent seasons, though, is that he's become a strong producer on top of that, scoring well over one goal per 60 minutes of play in three of the last four seasons. Right now, he's at 0.78. That's not a huge drop, but when every other core piece has matched or elevated its usual play, it's a noticeable one. There's still some meat on the bone left for Eriksson Ek, especially if he stays healthy after missing most of December with a lower-body injury.

13. New Jersey Devils, 25-15-4

Dec. 20 rank: 8

Sean's ranking: 12

Dom's ranking: 13

As good as Dawson Mercer's numbers are defensively in a tough role next to Nico Hischier, he could stand to bring more offensively. For the season, he's scored just 1.53 points per 60, which leaves the Devils wanting in the top six. It can't just be the team's top four guys producing all the offense — someone needs to step up, and that someone should be Mercer. He certainly looked like a player who could be that guy in his first two seasons; he just hasn't taken a step forward since.

14. Columbus Blue Jackets, 19-17-6

Dec. 20 rank: 27

Sean's ranking: 14

Dom's ranking: 15

An injury to Sean Monahan is bad news for the Blue Jackets, but it does leave the door open for Adam Fantilli to step up and show he can be a difference-maker. While the team as a whole has been a pleasant surprise this season, Fantilli has been the exact opposite as he's been mired in a sophomore slump. On top of not scoring much, he somehow has a 35 percent xG rate on the season. Fantilli has a lot more to give.

15. Vancouver Canucks, 18-12-10

Dec. 20 rank: 13

Sean's ranking: 16

Dom's ranking: 14

We'll save you all from yet another blustering blurb about the current forward feud at the top and instead talk about an arguably bigger problem: Every defenseman not named Quinn Hughes.

The team's defensive depth looked like it would be an issue going into the season. Instead, it looks like a full-blown catastrophe. It's bad but it also shouldn't be this bad. A lack of reliable puck-movers is a big problem, and if Tyler Myers is the second guy over the boards in overtime, you're not going to have a good time, as the Canucks experienced Wednesday against the Capitals. Vancouver isn't in panic mode yet but does need major help beyond Hughes; this doesn't look like an issue that can be solved in the room.

16. Ottawa Senators, 19-18-3

Dec. 20 rank: 14

Sean's ranking: 15

Dom's ranking: 16

We'll cut Shane Pinto at least a bit of slack. No Senator has been burned more by bad luck — Ottawa is controlling 55.16 percent of the expected goals when he's on the ice. Not too shabby.

Still, the man has four assists on the season. He's producing primary assists (0.32 per 60) at a worse rate than Brett Pesce, Jaccob Slavin and Alex Carrier — three defensive defensemen. Secondary assists? Even worse. Pinto's 0.11 per 60 a) looks like a typo and b) is tied for 617th in the league. He needs to be better, period.

17. St. Louis Blues, 20-19-4

Dec. 20 rank: 22

Sean's ranking: 17

Dom's ranking: 18

Credit to the Blues — they're getting plenty from their top guys. It'd be nice for them, though, if Brandon Saad could go on a bit of a heater. He's scoring at a 14-goal pace this season, down from 26 in 2023-24. More production would help with their wild-card push or raise his stock at the deadline. Either would be welcome.

18. Utah Hockey Club, 17-16-7

Dec. 20 rank: 17

Sean's ranking: 18

Dom's ranking: 17

In his first two seasons, Matias Maccelli carved out a niche as a productive, playmaking winger and looked like a legitimate building block for whatever comes next in Utah. Year 3 has been ugly — his five-on-five points per 60 have nearly been cut in half (2.57 to 1.32), as has his primary assist rate (1.17 to 0.55).

19. Calgary Flames, 19-14-7

Dec. 20 rank: 18

Sean's ranking: 19

Dom's ranking: 20

Yegor Sharangovich was productive enough in his first season with the Flames — 59 points in 82 games — to sign a five-year, \$28.75 million contract extension. He hasn't followed that up, though, with 11 overall points in 33 games and an abysmal 0.82 points per 60 at even strength. Calgary continues to hang around in the wild-card race; some decent production from Sharangovich would go a long way.

20. Montreal Canadiens, 19-18-3

Dec. 20 rank: 28

Sean's ranking: 20

Dom's ranking: 21

The Canadiens have forced their way into the wild-card picture despite getting nearly nothing, in terms of production, from Juraj Slafkovský, who's currently scoring at a nine-goal pace. He's generating chances at a better rate than that, though, and shooting just 8.7 percent, so more could be on the way.

#### 21. Pittsburgh Penguins, 18-17-8

Dec. 20 rank: 20

Sean's ranking: 21

Dom's ranking: 22

At first blush, a few different Penguins could slot in here — but really, how much more can they expect from Tristan Jarry? Kris Letang, though, can certainly be better. Pittsburgh is getting outscored 35-23 with him on the ice at five-on-five, and that's not solely due to goaltending; a 45 percent expected goal share is ugly. The worst of Letang's career, in fact. He needs to find a way to dial his production back up — and that's a big ask, given Pittsburgh's terminal lack of forward depth and the fact that he turns 38 in a few months.

#### 22. New York Rangers, 19-20-2

Dec. 20 rank: 21

Sean's ranking: 24

Dom's ranking: 19

The Rangers earned a gutsy win against the Devils on Thursday night that has the potential to turn the whole season around. Who needs to step up to make that happen and get this team back in the playoffs? Pretty much everyone not named Adam Fox.

Against the Devils, some of the non-Foxes delivered. Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad and Vincent Trocheck each had a point, while K'Andre Miller had his best defensive game in ages. The Rangers looked good, and that all starts at the top. It can't just be Fox — the rest of the core needs to be better. Thursday was a great start.

#### 23. Detroit Red Wings, 18-18-4

Dec. 20 rank: 23

Sean's ranking: 22

Dom's ranking: 23

You would be forgiven if you forgot Vladimir Tarasenko was a member of the Detroit Red Wings — we certainly did with how quiet he's been this season. Was there evidence he was probably washed last season? Definitely. And this year just feels like further proof of that. Maybe Todd McLellan can get more out of Tarasenko in the second half. But even if your expectations for him were already low, it's hard not to be disappointed with just four goals and 14 points in 39 games.

#### 24. Boston Bruins, 20-19-5

Dec. 20 rank: 15

Sean's ranking:

Dom's ranking: 24

Elias Lindholm, Pavel Zacha, Charlie Coyle, Trent Frederic — pick any guy on the team who plays center. None has been good enough, a problem Boston wasn't supposed to have after signing Lindholm. He was supposed to be the top-line center this team was missing while also pushing everyone down to their appropriate roles. Turns out Lindholm isn't that. As long as Boston's center depth is among the league's absolute worst, the playoffs are going to be a pipe dream. From top to bottom, the team's pivots need to be better.

25. New York Islanders, 16-18-7

Dec. 20 rank: 24

Sean's ranking: 26

Dom's ranking: 25

Outside of Bo Horvat, it's been a rough season for the Isles' core pieces. Mathew Barzal, Brock Nelson and Noah Dobson all have underwhelmed to some degree. We're going with Ilya Sorokin here, though, simply because we know just how much of a difference he can make. Thursday's 30-save shutout against Vegas was a great reminder, but his overall numbers (.901 save percentage, 2.45 goals saved below expected) are still miles short of his ceiling.

26. Philadelphia Flyers, 17-20-5

Dec. 20 rank: 19

Sean's ranking: 25

Dom's ranking: 27

Of the 58 goalies who have played 10 or more games, the Flyers have three in the bottom 10 when it comes to GSAX per game. Samuel Ersson, Ivan Fedotov, Aleksei Kolosov — it doesn't matter, they've all been bad. Someone, anyone, needs to step up and take the reins here, as the Flyers have looked formidable otherwise. It's the goaltending that's let them down night in and night out, all but crushing whatever playoff hopes the team had this season.

27. Buffalo Sabres, 16-21-5

Dec. 20 rank: 32

Sean's ranking: 27

Dom's ranking: 26

Much as everyone likes Dylan Cozens, he's on pace for 41 points. Last season, he had 47. Plenty about Owen Power screams "top-pair defenseman" — but not his performance. He's been, basically, average. If the Sabres make it out of this mess, it'll be because one (or both) of those guys helps drag them.

28. Anaheim Ducks, 17-19-5

Dec. 20 rank: 26

Sean's ranking: 28

Dom's ranking: 28

It's important to note that Leo Carlsson just turned 20. That makes it way, way too early to make any grand proclamations about his future. Still, he's been across-the-board worse in Year 2, particularly as a playmaker. He's the centerpiece of Anaheim's rebuild (for now), and the Ducks need him to start looking the part.

29. Seattle Kraken, 17-22-3

Dec. 20 rank: 25

Sean's ranking: 29

Dom's ranking: 29

Chandler Stephenson somehow has a 31 percent xG rate this season while scoring just 1.33 points per 60 at five-on-five. Many smart folks figured that contract would be onerous from the get-go, but even the most pessimistic couldn't have imagined it would be this bad this quickly. Stephenson is making \$6.25 million this year and for six years after, and he's going to need a helluva second half to be worth even half of that.

30. Nashville Predators, 13-21-7

Dec. 20 rank: 31

Sean's ranking: 30

Dom's ranking: 30

Given how bad Nashville's offense has been, the answer that fits best has to be Andrew Brunette. With how strong Florida was offensively during his tenure and how he coaxed last year's Predators to incredible offensive heights, it's baffling that this year's group is the league's absolute worst at scoring goals at five-on-five. By a lot. After adding some big-time offensive weapons in the summer, there's no excuse for that. Brunette needs to squeeze more out of this team in the second half.

31. Chicago Blackhawks, 14-25-2

Dec. 20 rank: 30

Sean's ranking: 31

Dom's ranking: 31

We can move on from the "Is something up with Connor Bedard?" discussion. He's got 11 points in his last eight games. All is well. Beyond that, though, who on this roster should be doing more? Frank Nazar has played a dozen games. Tyler Bertuzzi is up to 14 goals. Everyone else is basically living up to their expectations. That's not much of a compliment; it is, however, the truth.

32. San Jose Sharks, 13-24-6

Dec. 20 rank: 29

Sean's ranking: 32

Dom's ranking: 32

San Jose has at least one important box checked: Macklin Celebrini is as good as the Sharks could've hoped — and the "Baby Auston Matthews" act plays well on TV, too. The next step is getting more from Will Smith, who has 14 points in 35 games and expected/actual goal rates around 39 percent. He's also played just 43 minutes with Celebrini. Let's get that fixed.

## The Athletic / NHL's biggest disappointments at 2024-25 midseason: Underwhelming performances and bad vibes

By The Athletic NHL Staff- January 12, 2025

It's halfway through the NHL's regular season, and some great surprises are emerging around the league. But on the other side of the spectrum, there are also some big disappointments emerging, too.

From underwhelming players to special teams to goaltending and more, there are a lot of unexpected developments we heard about this week when The Athletic asked its NHL staff for their biggest disappointments as many teams have either crossed or are close to the 41-game mark.

Here's one disappointment for each team in the first half.

### Anaheim Ducks

Trevor Zegras failing to thrive: For the second straight season, Zegras has lost a chunk of time as he recovers from knee surgery that was required after he tore his right meniscus on Dec. 4 against Vegas. Thursday's game in St. Louis was the 17th straight he's missed after suiting up only 31 times in 2023-24 due to two separate injuries. These losses of significant playing time should be factored into the cratered offensive production he's had in these two years, but it also reflects some on Greg Cronin's mission to have the creative talent play a more responsible 200-foot game. Zegras does appear to be closing in on a return, perhaps in another week or two. A 30th-ranked power play through Thursday can use his vision and passing. — Eric Stephens

### Boston Bruins

Jeremy Swayman as a No. 1 goalie: Swayman was expected to start slowly because of the pressure of adjusting to being a full-time No. 1 following Linus Ullmark's trade. His issues were compounded by missing all of training camp while negotiating his contract. He should have had enough time to catch up. But Swayman has yet to match his play from last year's playoffs, which helped earn him his \$66 million contract. — Fluto Shinzawa

### Buffalo Sabres

Dylan Cozens and Jack Quinn: Signed to a long-term deal with a \$7.1 million cap hit, Cozens was supposed to be a bona fide No. 2 center. Instead, he's on pace for 41 points and is minus-13. He has two power-play points despite the fifth most power-play ice time on the team. He and Jack Quinn, who has 16 points and has been a healthy scratch at times, were supposed to take a step and solidify Buffalo's secondary scoring. That hasn't happened. — Matthew Fairburn

### Calgary Flames

Lack of goal scoring: If the Flames want to make the playoffs, they'll need a goal-scoring outburst. Because ranking in the league's bottom five as of Thursday in goals doesn't help. Only three Flames players have goal tallies in double digits: Jonathan Huberdeau, Nazem Kadri and Connor Zary. If the Flames decide this core is worth pushing toward the postseason, they'll need a goal scorer of some sort. — Julian McKenzie

### Carolina Hurricanes

Five-on-five play: No team Corsis harder than the Hurricanes, and that's again true this season. Carolina leads the league in possession by a wide margin, just as it has the previous two seasons. Yet underlying numbers success hasn't translated into a wide margin on the score sheet, with the Hurricanes scoring

just five more goals (91) than they've allowed (86) through 42 games at five-on-five. Much of that rests on Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov, who have totaled seven five-on-five goals (Svechnikov has just two), and their ability to convert chances will be key in the second half. — Cory Lavalette

#### Chicago Blackhawks

Philipp Kurashev: The Blackhawks were hopeful Kurashev would take that next step this season after breaking out for 54 points and becoming a consistent linemate for Connor Bedard last season. Kurashev hasn't come close to that. He has five points through 30 games and has been a healthy scratch under two coaches this season. It's unlikely he will remain with the organization after the season. — Scott Powers

#### Colorado Avalanche

Special teams: Colorado's perennial top-five power play hasn't looked like itself this season, ranking 17th in the league at 22 percent through Thursday. What's even more concerning is the underlying numbers suggest that's where the power play belongs. The Avalanche rank 15th in expected goals per 60 minutes and 17th in high-danger chances with the man advantage, so this isn't just the result of a cold shooting streak. The penalty kill also ranks in the bottom half of the league with only a 78.4 percent kill rate. Both of those special teams will need to improve in the second half of the season, and Colorado certainly has the personnel to make that happen — especially on the power play. — Jesse Granger

#### Columbus Blue Jackets

Damon Severson: The Blue Jackets thought they were adding a steady veteran to their defensive corps two summers ago when they agreed to a sign-and-trade deal with New Jersey for the veteran blueliner. But Severson hasn't been steady at all. After struggling in his first season in Columbus, Severson has again hit a rough patch in Year 2. He's been a healthy scratch three times in the last eight games, with more possibly on the way. Severson's big issue has been turning pucks over in his own end and struggling to adapt to coach Dean Evason's seemingly defenseman-friendly system. — Aaron Portzline

#### Dallas Stars

Mavrik Bourque: After winning the AHL scoring title and MVP last season, Bourque seemed poised to step right in and be a major contributor for the Stars, but he's mustered just three goals in 35 games. There's nothing terribly unusual or concerning about a rookie experiencing growing pains in his first NHL campaign, but Bourque isn't 18 or 19, he's 23 years old, and Wyatt Johnston and Logan Stankoven wrecked the curve a bit with how they were instant NHL successes. — Mark Lazerus

#### Detroit Red Wings

Vladimir Tarasenko: Tarasenko was supposed to be the big offensive addition this past offseason, but it just hasn't worked out that way. He was never going to be able to replace all the offense the Red Wings lost amid a salary cap crunch, but through the first 40 games, he has just four goals and 14 points. He's mostly playing on Detroit's third line, and for a player with a cap hit of \$4.75 million (for another season, too) the impact just hasn't been enough. What's more concerning: Even with those numbers, he's still seventh in scoring among Red Wings forwards. — Max Bultman

#### Edmonton Oilers

Jeff Skinner's fit: This is not how things were expected to go for Skinner when the Oilers signed him on July 1. He's been all but stapled to the bottom six since the first homestand of the season amid being unable to establish any chemistry with Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl. He has just seven goals and 15 points in 40 games. The low point was getting scratched on Dec. 29. The good news is Skinner has played

much better since then and appears on the right path toward moving up the lineup. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

#### Florida Panthers

The roller-coaster ride: Since a seven-game winning streak that ended on Nov. 9, the Panthers have gone 14-12-1 with a goal differential of zero. Given their track record, there's no reason to sound the alarm — but still, that's a fairly long run of up-and-down play. It's not just a run of poor goaltending, though Sergei Bobrovsky and Spencer Knight could be better. Energy conservation? Perhaps. — Sean Gentile

#### Los Angeles Kings

An inefficient power play: If one were to nitpick, they could focus on Phillip Danault having only three goals or Trevor Moore suffering a big drop-off after erupting for 31 goals last season. But it's been a power play that's ranked 28th and converting at just 16 percent through Thursday after being 11th last season and converting at a 22.6 percent rate. Kevin Fiala might be among the disappointments here as he has just 11 power-play points compared to 30 last season and 24 the year before. Shockingly, Adrian Kempe only has two goals on the man advantage. It's not so easy replacing the sidelined Drew Doughty as the PP1 quarterback. — Eric Stephens

#### Minnesota Wild

The penalty kill: So much was made in the offseason of repairing the penalty kill that plagued them last season and in the 2023 playoffs against Dallas. Instead, they're on par with or even worse than 2023-24. Other than one 16-kill run over five games in November and a recent strong game at Carolina (4-for-4), the kill has been a disaster all season. It ranks 29th at 71.6 percent and they've given up at least one power-play goal in 24 of 42 games. The only saving grace is that the Wild have been short-handed the fifth-fewest times in the NHL (102). — Michael Russo

#### Montreal Canadiens

Juraj Slafkovský's slow start: Slafkovský had a difficult start to last season, his second in the NHL, but from Dec. 16 to the end of last season, he had 43 points in 53 games. He signed an 8-year, \$60.8 million contract extension over the summer, and that, coupled with his strong second half last season, set the bar extremely high this year. And he has not met that bar. Slafkovský has 22 points in 37 games, but more than the production, he simply has not looked nearly as impactful as he did over the last 50-odd games of last season. Luckily for him, the team has been winning without him leaving much of a mark, and he still has time to figure it out. — Arpon Basu

#### Nashville Predators

Gustav Nyquist: It's probably not fair to isolate Nyquist, on a team with so many coming up short of expectations. But he is on pace for 34 points after his 75-point season of 2023-24, which was a huge part of the Preds making the playoffs and having an elite top line. That was the best of his career by a 21-point margin, by the way. Still, the Preds were hoping the 35-year-old could come close to last season's performance. — Joe Rexrode

#### New Jersey Devils

Šimon Nemeč's season: After showing promise as a rookie in 2023-24, Nemeč — the No. 2 draft pick in 2022 — has spent most of this season in the minors. The Devils beefed up their blue line over the summer, and Nemeč got sent down once they were healthy. He has 11 points in 20 games for AHL Utica. There's not necessarily a reason for long-term concern, but he has also not taken a jump enough to stand out among a crowded group of defensemen. — Peter Baugh



## New York Islanders

Special teams: We've said it an awful lot around here: No NHL team has ever been as bad as the Isles have on special teams through the first half. Both power play and penalty kill are dead last, the 64.4 percent penalty kill is on pace to be the worst since the NHL started compiling special teams numbers in 1977, and the 10.9 percent power play would be among the 10 worst ever. It's actually impressive that they're not last in the league standings given those totals. — Arthur Staple

## New York Rangers

Players over 30: The Rangers have an older core, and on the whole, it has underperformed. Chris Kreider has dealt with back issues and is currently on injured reserve with an upper-body injury. He has not been as productive as in past years. Mika Zibanejad has had a difficult season, too, and Vincent Trocheck's numbers are down. Artemi Panarin has been good but not the force he was in 2023-24. All of that has led to a disappointing season and concern about the core going forward. — Peter Baugh

## Ottawa Senators

Goalie inconsistency: The Senators signed Linus Ullmark to fix their goalie troubles once and for all. But a bad November and back injury are enough to cause some concern. Ullmark did have an amazing December before the injury, but are Anton Forsberg and Leevi Merilainen sufficient to hold the team together? The fact that the Senators have to worry about goaltending is a disappointment. — Julian McKenzie

## Philadelphia Flyers

The goaltending: If the Flyers had simply received average goaltending this season, they might be in a playoff spot. Instead, No. 1 Samuel Ersson has been plagued by injury while Ivan Fedotov and Aleksei Kolosov have arguably been the two worst goalies in the NHL this season. The result is a team with the worst save percentage in the NHL, as well as 20.77 goals-against above expected, according to MoneyPuck, by far the worst mark in the league. — Kevin Kurz

## Pittsburgh Penguins

The goaltending is worse than feared: Tristan Jarry has allowed six first-shot goals. He was sent to the AHL. His coach seems to have hit a breaking point. Alex Nedeljkovic is fine for a couple of games but looks like a fringe NHL goalie when his workload is extended. Neither goalie is stopping 89 percent of shots. The Penguins might have the worst goalie situation in the league. It's thwarting a playoff push. — Rob Rossi

## San Jose Sharks

Multiple lengthy losing streaks: The Sharks are better than last year's NHL-worst club that came through with securing the No. 1 pick and Macklin Celebrini. But while their competitive element on a nightly basis is miles better, they've still had to endure long winless stretches. One was an 0-7-2 spell to open the season, and another 0-7-1 run came from Dec. 14-31. Coach Ryan Warsofsky knew what he was getting into with his first NHL head coaching job and the long game is being played in San Jose, but one key task he'll have is making sure a losing culture doesn't overwhelm Celebrini and other talented youngsters who only knew winning before now. Shaving those losing streaks to fewer games will help. — Eric Stephens

## Seattle Kraken

Chandler Stephenson: It's been a bumpy transition for free-agent addition Stephenson. The former Vegas Golden Knights X-factor has looked a little bit slower and his motor has run somewhat

inconsistently in his first Seattle season, while his typically incredible five-on-five production has been very pedestrian. In Vegas, Stephenson was a reliable driver who hit 50 points a season easily with limited power-play time. In Seattle, he's leaning on power-play production to prop up his production, without driving play. — Thomas Drance

#### St. Louis Blues

Special teams: Once again, the special teams have been poor in St. Louis. The power play ranks 25th (17.9 percent) in the NHL through Thursday and has gone stretches of seven, five and four games this season without a goal. Only Jordan Kyrrou (five) and Jake Neighbours (four) have more than two power-play goals this season. The penalty kill (73.8 percent, 27th in the NHL through Thursday) has been even worse. The unit has given up two or more power-play goals in a game four times this season. — Jeremy Rutherford

#### Tampa Bay Lightning

Andrei Vasilevskiy's first half: The Lightning's depth scoring disappoints, but that isn't exactly a surprise. The fact that Vasilevskiy hasn't rebounded to his usual heights is a bit more concerning. He has saved 6.25 goals above expected in 30 games which lands him 23rd in the league. That's fine; it's just not up to the bar he has set for himself in years past. There is still time for him to heat up, and that's what this team needs if they want to go on a deep run. — Shayna Goldman

#### Toronto Maple Leafs

The power play: One of the NHL's best regular-season power plays the previous few seasons has been out of sync for most of the season and barely in the top 20 league-wide. What's so odd is it's all the same personnel, with a first unit usually including Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, William Nylander, John Tavares and Morgan Rielly. One difference: Marc Savard, in his first year with the Leafs as an assistant coach, is running the unit. Here and there, Savard has swapped out Rielly for a fifth forward in Matthew Knies, but that hasn't really stuck either. Also odd: The power play was arguably at its best when Matthews was out with an injury in November. — Jonas Siegel

#### Utah Hockey Club

Matias Maccelli's power outage: The young Finn was one of the NHL's most pleasant surprises the past two seasons, with 49 points in 64 games in 2022-23 to finish fourth in Calder Trophy voting. He followed that up with 57 points last year. That made him the ninth youngest player to produce at least 100 points over that span, putting him in a class with far more heralded players such as Seth Jarvis and Wyatt Johnston. This year he's been in a brutal season-long slump, with just 5 goals and 12 points in 39 games, which has left him at times on the fourth line. A lot of Hockey Clubbers have struggled offensively this season as they've fallen to 23rd in goals per game through Thursday, but Maccelli has had one of the toughest drop-offs of anyone league-wide. — James Mirtle

#### Vancouver Canucks

Bad vibes: There's a lot that's been disappointing about this Canucks season — rough injury luck, a variety of star players underperforming, the lack of scoring chances, an inability to follow up on last season's apparently breakthrough convincingly — but the general vibe around this Canucks team takes the cake. Vancouver has been in the national headlines on a seemingly everyday basis, their stars are a constant subject of trade rumors and widespread, league-wide speculation about dysfunctional locker room dynamics. Last year's feel-good Canucks story has turned very sour in the first half of the year, which is far and away the greatest disappointment. — Thomas Drance

#### Vegas Golden Knights

Tomas Hertl: It's hard to find many disappointments on the team with the best record in the NHL to this point, but if I had to pick one it's Hertl's play at even strength. In his first full season with the Golden Knights, Hertl has been a major part of the power play's success, with seven goals and four assists with the man advantage. At five-on-five, it has been a struggle since he was traded to Vegas last season. Hertl is tied for 11th on the team with only three goals at even strength, and has the worst rating on the team at minus-10. That is a bit concerning considering he's 31 and still has five more years left on his contract. — Jesse Granger

#### Washington Capitals

Hendrix Lapierre: He was good enough in 2023-24 to begin the season as the Caps' No. 3 center, but Lapierre got off to an ugly start and never quite recovered. By mid-November, it was enough of an issue for Washington to re-acquire Lars Eller from Pittsburgh. Lapierre shifted to wing but never quite found his stride, putting up eight assists in 27 games and frequently watching from the press box. He's currently with the team's AHL affiliate. — Sean Gentile

#### Winnipeg Jets

Yet another bottom-tier penalty kill: Winnipeg's penalty kill was a weakness last season and has given up more goals per minute of penalty-kill time this year than last. It would be a bigger story if the Jets' power play wasn't scoring more than enough goals to make up for it, but the penalty kill still costs them wins. The Jets give up too many shots from the flanks and don't clog up enough lanes, win their boxouts, or clear enough rebounds to make up for the shooting gallery. The Jets need their penalty killers to play faster, bigger, or both, but they're still vulnerable to the same movement, high tips and net-crashing that Colorado unleashed upon them during last year's playoffs. — Murat Ates

## The Athletic / NHL recovery tips: 9 postgame routines that non-athletes can do too

By Fluto Shinzawa- January 12, 2025

Gabbi Frederic likes to stay active, which is not uncommon for the mother of an NHL player.

“Good athlete,” Boston Bruins forward Trent Frederic said of his mom. “Not a professional athlete.”

The former field hockey player does not train to the degree her son does. But as the owner of a water aerobics business, she works with bands and weights. Out of the pool, she runs, lifts and walks.

Gabbi takes her fitness and recovery seriously enough to have a cold tub installed at the family’s St. Louis home. She is addicted to her three-minute dunk.

“It’s good to wake you up,” she said. “It really is a great anti-inflammatory and a great wake-you-up, bottom line. It really is. It’s crazy, because I actually love, love, love it. I look forward to getting in it.”

In that way, she is replicating what her 26-year-old son does after every game for at least five minutes.

“The cold tub is great for me,” he said. “I can sense the recovery. I even do it before the game.”

Mother and son share their cold-water affinity to the point where Trent, who also lives in St. Louis during the offseason, regularly visits his childhood home for morning immersion. Gabbi Frederic jokes that it was the real reason she purchased the cold tub.

“He’ll come over for breakfast in the morning,” Gabbi Frederic said with a smile. “Then he’ll go downstairs, do the cold tub, do some stretching or whatever before he goes to train, because they never stop training. Then he comes up and we have our special time. I’ll make him breakfast. That is the impetus. He’s like, ‘Mom, I’ll come over every morning if you get this.’”

In a league stuffed with back-to-back tilts, three games in four nights and travel at all hours, recovery is critical for performance. But the steps the world’s most elite athletes take after games also apply to everyday folks who go to the gym after work, run 5Ks or ride bikes.

“You feel better when the body’s moving the way it should,” said the Detroit Red Wings’ Ben Chiarot. “Cold tub after a run would be great. Reduce inflammation on your joints. Same with diet. Brings the inflammation down. I find that diet is one of the biggest factors for inflammation in my body.”

Following are nine postgame recovery routines and why players prefer them. Answers have been edited for clarity:

### Going in the cold tub

“I love cold tubs,” said the Bruins’ Pavel Zacha. “Today (an off day), I did one in the morning. I’m going to do a long one after practice. The morning ones are more to wake up. It’s full body. After practices, it’s more for my legs and my back, so I’m just kind of sitting there. Big fan of those.”

The Bruins’ sports performance department has informed players that five minutes is the optimal time to spend in the tub. The trick is to get past the initial shock.

“By minute five, you’re chilling,” said Andrew Peeke. “It’s the first 30 seconds you have to get through. Once you’re in there, you’re fine.”

Zacha’s legs feel better after a long tub. So does his mind. It may be why he is a regular visitor.

“It’s a little mental too,” said Zacha. “I believe in it. So it works. Especially when you do the full dunk in the cold tub, you just really wake up. Especially before games. You nap, then you drive to the rink. The full-body cold tub wakes you up. Being underwater in a cold tub, it gets you moving. I feel more refreshed. Your legs are lighter. But the most difference I feel after games when I do the cold tub — the next morning my legs feel better.”

#### Eating non-inflammatory foods

“As clean as possible,” said Chiarot. “Vegetables. Protein. Natural source of carbs. Sweet potato or something like that. Rice. Diet brings the inflammation down. I find that diet is one of the biggest factors for inflammation in my body. Making sure no sugars, breads, gluten — things like that that can cause inflammation. Stay away from those after a game.”

#### Emphasizing quantity as well as quality in postgame meals

“We have our postgame protein shakes and load up on electrolytes again after the game, even though you’re drinking that throughout the game too,” Peeke said. “Food, a lot of protein and carbohydrates for me. We burn so much on a daily basis. So we get a little bit of a free pass in being able to eat a lot. So just try to refuel as much as possible. The chefs here are great. They set up a good platter for us. Just try and get as much down as you can.”

Non-professional athletes might have to be careful about this approach, given how many calories NHL players are burning through games, practices and workouts.

#### Stretching

“I’ve got to stretch,” Chiarot said. “I’ve got to get the mobility back in my hips and back. That’s first. Hip flexors, glutes, groins.”

Specifically for his back, Chiarot uses ELDOA, a method targeted to decompress joints.

“Keep everything long and loose,” Chiarot said. “This is over years, knowing what works for me. Just the years, experience and seeing how my body reacts to different things. If I didn’t stretch, the body would feel tight and stiff.”

#### Wearing Normatec boots

Parker Wotherspoon doesn’t usually put Normatec boots on postgame. But the day after, Wotherspoon likes to wear them for about 30 minutes.

“Legs feel much better the next day,” said the Bruins defenseman. “And we’re flying all the time, so my legs and feet get swollen. So using those boots gets all the blood out of there.”

#### Using mouth tape while sleeping

“I love it,” said the Bruins’ Charlie Coyle. “You don’t know the whole science. People could be blowing smoke. But I think there’s something to it. A lot of people are mouth breathers. They say that’s not a good thing for some reason. But you have the mouth tape on, you’re breathing through your nose and everything’s fresh. It’s just a calm feeling.”

Coyle started wearing mouth tape last year. It didn’t go well at first.

“I used hockey tape my first time,” the center said. “I put it on and I had red all over my lips. Now I have this kind that’s almost breathable in a way. My wife thinks I’m a crazy person.”

#### Sleeping on a cold mattress

Upon the recommendation of former teammate James van Riemsdyk, Coyle bought an Eight Sleep cooling mattress pad. Coyle, who says he is a light sleeper, likes a cold mattress to help him sleep.

“It’s really nice,” Coyle said. “If you have it for your full bed, you can have yours be cold and the other one hot if your wife likes it hot. I like it cold enough so I can get under the covers. You can go to hotels, and sometimes those rooms don’t even get cold. They stay hot. You can’t even get under the covers. You’re sweating. You wake up a ton. You need it cold. They say there’s a lot of science behind that — that you need it at a certain temp to go to sleep and stay asleep. I just run hot. I tell my wife that it’s my sleep. It’s my job. It’s recovery.”

Using personal wellness technology

Seattle Kraken defenseman Vince Dunn likes to try new things. He has two go-to’s when it comes to personal tech: PowerDots and red light therapy.

“It circulates blood flow and kind of simulates a massage,” Dunn explained of PowerDots, which are electrical stimulation devices he places on his body. “I usually do that after my Normatecs. They basically stick onto your legs. It runs electrical currents through your legs. Just for about 20 minutes.”

As for red light therapy, Dunn uses Kala panels. The way Dunn understands it, red light therapy initiates recovery by reducing soreness and improving blood flow.

“I think scientifically, it is making a difference in making my legs feel good,” Dunn said. “I definitely think it’s a routine thing with where I’m at right now. So maybe it just kind of mentally makes me feel like I’ve done everything to prepare for the next day.”

Alternating cold and hot tubs the next morning

“That contrast will always make my legs feel better in the afternoon,” said the Bruins’ Brandon Carlo. “I’ll do a minute in each. A minute hot tub, a minute cold tub. Five sets of back-to-back, 10 minutes total. Just to flush the legs out. That always makes me feel better. Cold tubs have always made my legs feel better. I didn’t really start doing the contrast until I learned more from our trainers. It brings all the circulation to your legs, then flushes it out afterwards. The cold will compress and tighten everything up. Once you go in the hot, it reopens. So your blood starts pumping again. The first minute (of cold) sucks. But after that, it feels good.”

## The Athletic / Which NHL Western Conference trades and signings have aged best and worst?

By Harman Dayal- January 12, 2025

The offseason is when NHL GMs usually make their biggest, boldest moves. It's a manager's chance to finally weaponize cap flexibility, trade chips, dip into the free-agent market and engage in a flowing trade market to execute their blueprint.

We're at the halfway point of the 2024-25 season, which is a sensible time to re-evaluate every club's biggest offseason acquisitions (we won't dig into every depth addition unless there's been a noteworthy impact). Half a season isn't long enough to make a final verdict for trades or signing, especially as players acclimate to new cities, teammates and coaches, but it's enough of a sample to reflect on the early return on investment. Earlier, we analyzed the Eastern Conference, now it's time to look out West.

Let's dive in.

### Anaheim Ducks

Notable additions: Brian Dumoulin (acquired in exchange for a fourth-round pick), Robby Fabbri (acquired alongside a fourth-round pick in exchange for Gage Alexander)

Early returns: The Ducks had a surprisingly quiet offseason, sticking to just a couple of low-risk fliers.

Dumoulin has been deployed in a heavy shutdown role, averaging over 20 minutes per game, while absorbing the toughest matchups and the highest number of defensive zone starts among all Ducks blueliners. He's held up reasonably well in this difficult assignment. Yes, Anaheim's been decisively outshot and out-chanced during his shifts, but he's only been on the ice for 2.09 goals against per 60 at five-on-five.

Fabbri scored a career-high 18 goals and 32 points in 68 games for the Red Wings last year but is having an up-and-down 2024-25 campaign. He's missed some time with an injury and has only produced 10 points in 28 games, which is underwhelming because he's been handed a consistent top-six opportunity, averaging over 17 minutes per game.

### Calgary Flames

Notable additions: Anthony Mantha (\$3.5 million x one year), Kevin Bahl (acquired alongside a first-round pick in exchange for Jacob Markstrom), Jake Bean (\$1.75 million x two years), Justin Kirkland (\$775,000 x one year)

Early returns: Mantha was off to a promising start with the Flames (seven points in 13 games along with quality play-driving numbers), but suffered a season-ending ACL injury.

Bahl, the secondary piece from New Jersey in the Markstrom trade, is establishing himself as a top-four mainstay for the Flames. The giant 24-year-old defensive defenseman has played a crucial supporting role next to Rasmus Andersson on Calgary's shutdown pair.

Bahl isn't yet at the point where he's winning these matchup minutes — the Flames have conceded slightly more shots, scoring chances, and goals than they've created with Bahl on the ice — but the fact that he's effectively holding his own in a role where he's averaging 21:32 per game and defending against the opposition's star players is promising considering the massive step-up in responsibility and challenge compared to his role with New Jersey last year.

Bean has been competently handled sheltered third-pair minutes.

Kirkland thrived in a bottom-six role and emerged as a fan-favorite underdog story, but an ACL injury also cut his season short.

#### Chicago Blackhawks

Notable additions: Tyler Bertuzzi (\$5.5 million x four years), Teuvo Teravainen (\$5.4 million x three years), Alec Martinez (\$4 million x one year), Laurent Brossoit (\$3.3 million x two years), TJ Brodie (\$3.75 million x two years), Ilya Mikheyev (acquired as a cap dump, Blackhawks received a second-round pick and gave up a fourth-round pick), Pat Maroon (\$1.3 million x one year), Craig Smith (\$1 million x one year)

Early returns: The Blackhawks were supposed to take a step after a busy summer where they acquired several veterans to boost the supporting cast around Connor Bedard. Colleague Dom Luszczyszyn's Net Rating model even crowned them the most improved team in the offseason. The early return on the spending spree has been a mixed bag.

Chicago's blue line is one of the biggest issues. Newcomer Brodie has been a liability most nights. He's averaged fewer than 16 minutes per game and has gotten lit up defensively. During Brodie's five-on-five shifts, the Blackhawks have been outscored by a whopping 33-14 goal differential. Martinez, the other veteran signing expected to stabilize the back end, has performed decently but has only managed to stay healthy for 15 games.

GM Kyle Davidson's work up front has been much better. Bertuzzi's signing is a win — he's on pace for 27 goals and has gotten hot riding shotgun with Bedard lately, potting six goals in his last nine games.

Teravainen's been dynamite on the power play. 13 of his 28 points this season are on the man advantage, which is one of the catalysts behind the Blackhawks' power-play catapulting to 12th best in the NHL. You'd like to see him be more impactful at even-strength, however. Teravainen's only notched three goals and 12 points at five-on-five this season, while bouncing up and down the club's top nine.

Taking Mikheyev on as a cap dump is working out well. He's chipped in with eight goals in 40 games and has driven robust two-way results. Mikheyev's 47.7 percent control of on-ice five-on-five shot attempts is the best mark among Chicago forwards. He's the Blackhawks' only forward who doesn't have a negative goal differential during his five-on-five shifts.

Brossoit hasn't been able to play a single game this season because of knee issues.

#### Colorado Avalanche

Notable additions: Oliver Kylington (\$1.05 million x one year), Parker Kelly (\$825,000 x two years), Calvin De Haan (\$800,000 x one year),

Early returns: Colorado only touched the fringes of its roster last summer.

Kylington hasn't panned out despite looking like a shrewd low-risk, modest upside signing at the time. He had a disappointing start to the season, was even forced to play forward at times, and has been sidelined with an injury since Nov. 27. None of Colorado's depth defense acquisitions have hit between Kylington, Erik Brännström (who had a disappointing preseason before being shipped out to Vancouver) and De Haan.

Kelly is a competent fourth-line quality forward. He's had to play a bigger role than what's ideal because of the Avs' poor forward depth and injuries. He's a black hole offensively, but his defensive metrics are sound.



GM Chris MacFarland's offseason work may not have yielded much, but acquiring Mackenzie Blackwood (.940 save percentage) and Scott Wedgewood (.917 save percentage) midseason has miraculously fixed the club's goaltending woes.

#### Dallas Stars

Notable additions: Matt Dumba (\$3.75 million x two years), Ilya Lyubushkin (\$3.25 million x three years), Casey DeSmith (\$1 million x three years), Colin Blackwell (\$775,000 x one year)

Early returns: The Dumba contract was a questionable decision the moment it was signed and it doesn't look any better now.

Dumba hasn't come anywhere close to providing top-four value. He's averaging just 15:40 per game, struggled so mightily at one point that he was a healthy scratch, missed some games in December with an injury and has only contributed two points in 23 games.

Thankfully, Lyubushkin is working out better as a right-side defense stabilizer. The physical, stay-at-home defenseman is eating the second-toughest matchups on the Stars' blue line. He doesn't have the best play-controlling metrics but the Stars own a plus-five goal differential during his five-on-five shifts. Lyubushkin has also logged the second-most minutes on Dallas' penalty kill, which ranks second-best in the NHL.

DeSmith has exceeded expectations as the club's backup. The 33-year-old has posted an impressive .916 save percentage and saved nearly five goals above expected according to Evolving-Hockey's model.

#### Edmonton Oilers

Notable additions: Viktor Arvidsson (\$4 million x two years), Jeff Skinner (\$3 million x one year), Vasily Podkolzin (acquired in exchange for a fourth-round pick), Ty Emberson (acquired in exchange for Cody Ceci and a third-round pick)

Early returns: Arvidsson got off to a slow start, scoring just five points in his first 16 games before getting hurt in mid-November, but he finally appears to be finding his groove. The diminutive shot-first forward has piled up seven points in his last seven games. He's had an underwhelming first half, but given his long history of top-six success, his modest \$4 million cap hit and his recent hot streak, I'd expect him to live up to his contract in the second half of the season.

Skinner is the big, costly miss. He's on pace for just 30 points and owns ugly defensive numbers, with the Oilers carrying a minus-eight goal differential during his five-on-five shifts. Skinner's ice time is plummeting, as he's averaged less than 10 minutes in the last eight games. It's frustrating to see Skinner eat up \$3 million when the Oilers let Dylan Holloway, who's on pace to crack 60 points, walk away on just a \$2.29 million cap hit.

Podkolzin has been a really pleasant surprise. His 28-point pace might not jump off the page but he's made a consistent impact with his speed, energy, physicality and forechecking. Podkolzin's two-way impact has been stellar and he's grown into a valuable penalty killer.

#### Los Angeles Kings

Notable additions: Darcy Kuemper (acquired in exchange for Pierre-Luc Dubois), Warren Foegele (\$3.5 million x three years), Joel Edmundson (\$3.85 million x four years), Tanner Jeannot (acquired in exchange for a second and fourth-round pick)

Early returns: The Kings are one of the top teams in the NHL standings even though Drew Doughty has yet to suit up for a single game this season. A large chunk of that success can be traced back to better-than-expected results from the club's offseason haul.

Foegele has been a perfect fit up front. He is on pace for just shy of 25 goals and 50 points and his defensive metrics are elite (the Kings have surrendered less than 1.50 goals against per 60 during Foegele's five-on-five shifts). Foegele leads the Kings in five-on-five points and ranks top-20 among all NHL forwards with 11 five-on-five goals.

Kuemper is having a commendable bounce-back campaign in L.A. He's had a couple of brief absences due to injuries but has played to a sterling .920 save percentage as the Kings' starter. He's suffered just two regulation losses in 19 games.

Edmundson's contract looked like a potential overpay when it was signed, but he's modestly exceeded expectations too. He has effectively chewed up over 20 minutes per night. Edmundson's even-strength analytics are poor, but it hasn't stopped the Kings from decisively outscoring opponents with him on the ice. He's also put up sparkling defensive numbers on the Kings' top-10-ranked penalty kill.

Jeannot's offensive totals are underwhelming (eight points in 36 games), but he's found his fit and identity over the last month or so. He's been physical, aggressive, hard to play against and was performing well on the Kings' second line with Quinton Byfield and Foegele during Trevor Moore's absence.

#### Minnesota Wild

Notable additions: Yakov Trenin (\$3.5 million x four years)

Early returns: Minnesota is one of the league's best bounce-back stories this season, but it's been on the back of internal improvement rather than splashy acquisitions. GM Bill Guerin, who's still hamstrung by the Ryan Suter and Zach Parise buyout penalties, could only afford to dole out one significant contract and it went to Trenin.

Trenin is a defensive dynamo with his size, speed, work ethic and ability to win battles. He isn't delivering enough offense for a \$3.5 million player though, as he's registered just seven points in 37 games.

#### Nashville Predators

Notable additions: Steven Stamkos (\$8 million x four years), Jonathan Marchessault (\$5.5 million x five years), Brady Skjei (\$7 million x seven years), Scott Wedgewood (\$1.5 million x two years)

Early returns: The Predators were crowned offseason winners, but it's instead been a nightmare season. You can't pin all the blame for that on their new acquisitions — pretty much every returning Predators player has regressed compared to 2023-24 — but the July 1 fireworks didn't translate to the added offensive juice that the front office was hoping for.

After scoring 40 goals and 81 points last season, Stamkos is on pace for a pedestrian 24 goals and 50 points. Part of that is because the Predators lack the top-six playmakers and play-drivers to set Stamkos up in prime scoring locations.

In early December, the Preds shifted Stamkos from wing to center and bumped him up to the top line to play with Filip Forsberg and Jonathan Marchessault. That proved to be a significantly better fit (he's scored 12 points in 14 games since the transition), but given that he turns 35 in February, how many seasons can Stamkos be expected to do the heavy lifting as a top-line center?

Marchessault is on pace for 28 goals and 60 points, which is solid when you consider how anemic the team around him has been offensively. Marchessault didn't score a single five-on-five point through his first 20 games, but he's been on a tear lately with nine goals and 17 points in his last 13 games. All things considered, he's been full value for his \$5.5 million cap hit.

Skjei isn't living up to expectations offensively or defensively. He's only scored three goals and 13 points in 41 games, a far cry from the 13 goals and 47 points he registered last season and the 18 goals he piled up in 2022-23. He and Roman Josi failed to mesh early in the season and have since been separated. Skjei's 3.03 expected goals against per 60 rate is the worst mark among all Preds defenders, which doesn't reflect well on his defensive impact.

#### San Jose Sharks

Notable additions: Jake Walman (acquired as a cap dump, Sharks received a second-round pick), Tyler Toffoli (\$6 million x four years), Yaroslav Askarov (acquired alongside a third-round pick in exchange for a first-round pick, David Edstrom and Magnus Chrona), Alex Wennberg (\$5 million x 2 years), Barclay Goodrow (claimed off waivers), Cody Ceci (acquired alongside a third-round pick in exchange for Ty Emberson), Carl Grundstrom (\$1.8 million x two years), Ty Dellandrea (\$1.3 million x two years)

Early returns: San Jose's front office made shrewd decisions that have helped the club ice a more competitive and entertaining product.

Walman might be the biggest trade steal of the offseason. The Sharks didn't just get him for free, they were given a second-round pick by the Red Wings. Walman has scored 25 points in 31 games, with his 0.81 points-per-game clip ranking top-10 among all NHL defensemen this season. He isn't just racking up empty calorie points either, he's made a profound two-way impact at even strength.

During Walman's five-on-five shifts, the Sharks have been break-even in shots and have a plus-two goal differential. Both of those are by far the best numbers among all Sharks blueliners. He's done it all while averaging nearly 23 minutes per game.

Toffoli is producing at a team-high 28-goal pace and is delivering quality two-way results. He's been everything the Sharks could have hoped for as a steady veteran offensive leader.

Askarov has made a picture-perfect first impression in the Bay Area. He dominated the AHL to the tune of a .938 save percentage but now has a clear NHL opportunity following the Mackenzie Blackwood trade. Askarov is running away with that chance, posting a blistering .923 save percentage in seven big league games.

Claiming Goodrow off unconditional waivers was a head-scratching decision in the summer and still looks baffling now. Goodrow isn't performing like an everyday-caliber NHL forward (four points in 39 games and terrible underlying numbers) yet he's on the books at a \$3.64 million AAV through the 2026-27 season.

Wennberg has been a solid third-line center for the Sharks. He's made a positive defensive impact, while also chipping in with 20 points in 43 games. It was also smart for San Jose, which has an abundance of cap space, to pay him a generous, above-market value of \$5 million AAV to keep the term down to just two years.

Ceci's been serviceable in a tough minutes role and should be a useful trade deadline chip as a rental. It was a clever move considering San Jose already received a third-round pick for taking him on in the summer.

#### Seattle Kraken

Notable additions: Brandon Montour (\$7.14 million x seven years), Chandler Stephenson (\$6.25 million x seven years), Josh Mahura (\$775,000 x one year)

Early returns: GM Ron Francis took two big swings in the offseason — one appears to have hit while the other is a potentially catastrophic miss.

Montour has been Seattle's best defenseman this year. He's already scored eight goals and 23 points in 41 games and is chewing up a team-high 23:57 per game. Montour's two-way results, once you adjust for contextual factors using a tool like Evolving-Hockey's RAPM model, have been decisively positive too.

Stephenson's seven-year deal already looks like a massive headache. He's one of the worst two-way play drivers in the league — his 34 percent expected goal share at five-on-five ranks dead-last among 358 NHL forwards who have played at least 300 minutes this season. Stephenson's been productive on the power play so his overall point totals aren't too bad (27 points in 41 games), but make no mistake, he's an even-strength anchor who can't drive offense and struggles defensively.

#### St. Louis Blues

Notable additions: Philip Broberg (acquired via offer sheet), Dylan Holloway (acquired via offer sheet), Alexandre Texier (acquired in exchange for a fourth-round pick), Mathieu Joseph (acquired as a cap dump, Blues received a third-round pick), Ryan Suter (\$775,000 x one year), Radek Faksa (acquired in exchange for future considerations)

Early returns: Doug Armstrong's bold dual offer sheet of Broberg and Holloway may have been a stroke of genius.

Broberg's been a terrific all-around top-four addition. He has scored 14 points in 30 games and excelled defensively, surrendering just 1.36 goals against per 60 during his minutes. He should continue thriving in the second half, especially now that Cam Fowler's addition on the left side will take some weight off Broberg's shoulders.

Holloway is second on the Blues with 15 goals and is on pace for 61 points. He's big, fast, dynamic and skilled. Holloway's evolving into a play-driving ace — the Blues have controlled 54 percent of expected goals and outscored opponents 30-19 with him on the ice at five-on-five.

Joseph's been a disappointment. After scoring 35 points in 72 games with the Senators last year, he has mustered just four points in 26 games. It's not a costly error because the Blues received a third-round pick for taking on his contract, but they need him to bounce back because he's on the books for next season at a \$2.95 million AAV too.

Texier and Faksa have both been OK fourth-line caliber forwards who have each missed some games because of injury.

Suter logged huge minutes in the first half because of Nick Leddy's injury. He didn't exactly succeed in that role, but the fact that he wasn't an outright liability has to be deemed a win given his age and his league minimum cap hit. Suter's been able to settle closer to an 18-minute-per-game role since Fowler's acquisition and has offered steady defensive play in that timeframe.

#### Utah Hockey Club

Notable additions: Mikhail Sergachev (acquired in exchange for Conor Geekie, JJ Moser, a second-round pick and a seventh-round pick), John Marino (acquired alongside a fifth-round pick in exchange for two second-round picks), Ian Cole (\$3.1 million x one year), Kevin Stenlund (\$2 million x two years)

Early returns: Utah made a high-risk trade for Sergachev — in terms of acquisition cost and with the seven seasons left on his contract at an \$8.5 million cap hit, especially coming off an injury-plagued year. It's too early to make a long-term read on the trade, but the early dividends have been promising.

Sergachev is averaging nearly 26 minutes per game — his workload has been even heavier than expected because of Sean Durzi and John Marino's long-term absences — which ranks second-highest among all NHL players. He's held up well in those grueling minutes, with Utah creating more shots, scoring chances

and goals than it allows during Sergachev's five-on-five shifts. Sergachev's been a high-end offensive producer, scoring eight goals and 29 points from the back end. He's the all-situations No. 1 defenseman they needed.

Marino has yet to appear in a game because of injury.

Cole has been forced to play a bigger role than expected because of the back-end injuries, averaging a career-high 20:58 at 35. He's prone to taking a lot of penalties and in an ideal world, he'd be deployed more like a No. 5 defenseman, but he's been steady and solid defensively for the most part. He's certainly been full value for his \$3.1 million cap hit.

#### Vancouver Canucks

Notable additions: Jake DeBrusk (\$5.5 million x seven years), Danton Heinen (\$2.25 million x two years), Vincent Desharnais (\$2 million x two years), Kiefer Sherwood (\$1.5 million x two years), Derek Forbort (\$1.5 million x one year), Kevin Lankinen (\$950,000 x one year)

Early returns: The Canucks were forced to navigate a tricky, challenging situation last summer with eight notable pending UFAs and not a ton of cap flexibility. Vancouver's front office did an above-average job renovating the roster given the tough hand they were dealt, but they also made mistakes that have plagued the team this season.

DeBrusk is one of the best bang-for-buck top-six forward signings of the entire offseason. He's on pace for 34 goals at a favorable \$5.5 million cap hit.

Lankinen, who was signed in late September, has been a savior as the club's de facto starting goaltender. Thatcher Demko's missed most of the first half and without Lankinen, the next goalie up would have been Arturs Šilovs, who's struggled mightily this year. Lankinen's given the Canucks solid, above-average goaltending, delivering a .904 save percentage and saving 5.4 goals above expected in 28 games. There's no chance the club would be in a playoff position without him.

Sherwood has been a breakout top-nine player, with his \$1.5 million AAV looking like a steal. He leads the Canucks with 10 five-on-five goals and is behind only Quinn Hughes for the club's five-on-five points lead. The speed, relentless energy and physicality (he leads the NHL in hits by a country mile) he brings are arguably just as important as the secondary offense.

Vancouver's blue line has been an Achilles heel all season though, and that's where management has taken a ton of criticism.

The Canucks loaded up on too many big, stay-at-home defensemen by signing Forbort and Desharnais to a group that already included Carson Soucy and Tyler Myers. Vancouver's bottom-four defense was disastrous at breaking the puck out early in the season and has only been exposed further during Filip Hronek's long-term injury. The blue line is the club's biggest concern this season and the responsibility for that falls on management's shoulders.

#### Vegas Golden Knights

Notable additions: Ilya Samsonov (\$1.8 million x one year), Alexander Holtz (acquired alongside Akira Schmid in exchange for Paul Cotter and a third-round pick), Victor Olofsson (\$1.075 million x one year), Tanner Pearson (\$775,000 x one year)

Early returns: Vegas was forced to let several quality players walk in the offseason for salary cap reasons yet the club sits No. 1 in the league standings. None of their summer additions were flashy, but between having Noah Hanifin and Tomas Hertl for a full season, a dominant campaign from Jack Eichel's line and

several breakout performances from depth contributors like Brett Howden, Pavel Dorofeyev and Keegan Kolesar, you can understand why the Golden Knights are such a deep, complete team.

Samsonov is thriving as Vegas' backup, rocking a .907 save percentage and saving 6.1 goals above expected at a tidy \$1.8 million cap hit.

Holtz hasn't panned out (just three goals in 41 games), but Olofsson and Pearson have been quality bargain finds.

Olofsson was hurt for a chunk of games but has been excellent when healthy, scoring nine goals and 14 points in 20 games. Pearson, meanwhile, has chipped in with eight goals and 18 points in 41 games. He's a savvy, low-maintenance veteran who can provide a reliable 200-foot game — scooping that up for just \$775,000 is nice work.

#### Winnipeg Jets

Notable additions: Eric Comrie (\$825,000 x two years), Haydn Fleury (\$775,000 x one year)

Early returns: The Jets didn't make many noteworthy offseason moves beyond extending Dylan DeMelo.

Comrie has re-emerged as a dependable backup in his second tour of duty with the club. He'd struggled the last two years in Buffalo, even spending time in the AHL, but has pieced together a .904 save percentage in nine games. He's only won three of those nine games, which doesn't look great on the surface, but I'd argue that's mostly because he hasn't gotten enough run support in those starts.

Fleury is a capable No. 6/7 option. He struggled when Dylan Samberg's injury forced him to temporarily step up into the top four (he and Neal Pionk controlled just 40 percent of scoring chances and were outscored 9-5 in nearly 200 five-on-five minutes together), but you can't fault him for that because top-four duties are well above his league-minimum pay grade.

## The Athletic / PWHL sets U.S. attendance record in Denver as part of Takeover Tour

**By Hailey Salvian- January 13, 2025**

The Professional Women's Hockey League neutral-site game in Denver between the Minnesota Frost and Montreal Victoire has broken the record for attendance at a pro women's hockey game in the United States.

The league had previously set the record at a neutral-site game between Ottawa and Boston in Detroit (13,736) last season. But Sunday night's draw of 14,018 fans at Denver's Ball Arena — home of the NHL's Colorado Avalanche and NBA's Denver Nuggets — is now the largest crowd to watch a pro women's hockey game in the U.S.

Minnesota beat Montreal 4-2 in regulation and has taken back the No. 1 spot in league standings. Defender Maggie Flaherty scored the game winner, while defender Sophie Jaques — in her first game since Dec. 19 — led the way with a goal and an assist. Minnesota's starting goalie Maddie Rooney made 21 saves in her league-leading fifth victory of the year.

The PWHL, which launched in January 2024, currently has teams in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Boston, Minnesota and New York, but played in Denver as part of the league's nine-game "Takeover Tour" across North America. The first leg of the tour — in Seattle, Vancouver and Denver — drew a total of 45,664 fans in three games.

Wednesday night's sold-out crowd in Vancouver (19,038) was the highest attendance figure of the 2024-25 season and the third-largest crowd in PWHL history.

Back in October, Amy Scheer, the PWHL's senior vice president of business operations, announced the league is preparing for potential expansion and could add up to two teams as early as the 2025-26 season.

League executives have been tight-lipped about where teams could land but have said they will be examining everything from market size, the fan base, youth hockey participation, facilities and the economic opportunities in each market. The "Takeover Tour" games could prove to be critical auditions for potential expansion cities.

"This whole tour is about learning," Jayna Hefford, the PWHL's senior vice president of hockey operations, said in Vancouver. "Learning different markets, and fan bases, and buildings and the support that we have."

## ESPN / Winter Classic latest sign of golden age of Florida Panthers

By Ryan S. Clark- January 11, 2025

### Reactions

In the span of a week, South Florida has learned that Jimmy Butler no longer wants to play for the Miami Heat and that Tyreek Hill also wants out from the Miami Dolphins.

Amid all of this chaos lies the stability of the Florida Panthers.

Superstars aren't trying to flee the Panthers. They're getting traded and signing contract extensions, which was the case with Matthew Tkachuk. Fans aren't complaining about how the Panthers are struggling to get into the Stanley Cup playoffs. They're the defending Stanley Cup champions, trying to win a consecutive title. Sitting inside Amerant Bank Arena no longer feels like an empty and sterile environment, because the Panthers are selling out every home game for the first time in their history.

This is the golden age of the Florida Panthers.

It's also why the NHL finally decided to not only have the Panthers play in an outdoor game, but host the sport's signature event, the Winter Classic, on Jan. 2, 2026 against the New York Rangers at LoanDepot Park in Miami.

"We are always trying to raise that bar and do something unique," NHL president of business Keith Wachtel said. "The legacy that it leaves behind in the local market, I think is key. It has great national appeal and quite frankly you hear it all the time. Even though they won a Stanley Cup, unless you get one of those marquee events like an All-Star Game, certainly, but one of these Winter Classic or Stadium Series, it's like another validation for them as an organization."

The Panthers and South Florida playing host to the Winter Classic is part of the NHL's plan to make the state of Florida a priority. On Feb. 1, 2026, the Tampa Bay Lightning will host the Stadium Series against the Boston Bruins at Raymond James Stadium.

Having both games within a month of each other was a decision by the league that Wachtel said allows the state of Florida "to be the center of the hockey universe."

South Florida has hosted numerous Super Bowls, the NBA Finals, the World Series, national championship games, College Football Playoff games, an annual Formula 1 race, the Copa América Final and will add the World Cup to that list in 2026.

The Panthers alone have hosted three Stanley Cup Final games, two All-Star Games and two NHL drafts.

Yet the Panthers entered this season as one of three NHL teams that had never played in an outdoor game. Now that list is down to one (the Utah Hockey Club), as the Columbus Blue Jackets will host and play in this season's Stadium Series on March 1 at Ohio Stadium against the Detroit Red Wings.

Why now? What has suddenly made the Panthers and South Florida an attractive choice despite a team being in the market for 30 years? What could something like this mean for the franchise? And could another marquee event potentially help the Panthers plant even more seeds in their bid to grow generational fandom?

"Even when the Panthers were a newer franchise playing in downtown Miami, there was some [interest] down here," said Laura Courtley-Todd, an assistant sports administration professor at St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens. "It was a little bit of a hockey town but not as much as it is now. It's



become exciting to see. You just talk to people who are going to games. I have friends who are season-ticket holders. It's much different than it used to be."

ALTHOUGH THE NHL held an outdoor exhibition game at Caesars Palace back in 1991, there was still a belief those games were meant for more traditional hockey hotbeds. That dynamic changed once the league introduced the Stadium Series. The Stadium Series saw "nontraditional markets" get to host an outdoor game in venues such as Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, Cotton Bowl Stadium in Dallas, Nissan Stadium in Nashville and Carter-Finley Stadium at North Carolina State.

But what about Florida? Those in favor cited the truly unique experience that a venue in the state would bring. Those opposed wondered how the league could avoid an unplayable surface, given the humidity.

The court of public opinion received its long-awaited verdict in December 2024 when NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said at the Board of Governors meeting that the league was finalizing its plans for the Panthers to host an outdoor game.

"Wow? He said it?" Panthers defenseman Aaron Ekblad told ESPN on the day Bettman made the announcement. "It's obviously really exciting, and I would love that opportunity. I hope it will all work out and we will get that opportunity."

Ekblad, who has played his entire 11-year career for the Panthers, was instantly met with another question: Why does he think it took the league this long for the Panthers to be included?

"I think it's more just the logistics of it, right? It's Florida. It's hard to get ice in Florida," Ekblad explained. "I think that might be the only reason. I imagine that if we were in another city, then, we'd get it. It is what it is. I don't see it as a slight. The logistics of it are really difficult."

NHL president of content & events Steve Mayer said LoanDepot Park having a retractable roof makes it like T-Mobile Park in Seattle, where the NHL held its 2024 Winter Classic. The roof will allow the league to cover the ice surface and control the climate conditions while the ice is being built. Mayer said they will open the roof just before the game for a dramatic entrance.

It's a contrast from Raymond James Stadium. Mayer said the humidity -- along with Raymond James Stadium being a fully outdoor venue with no roof -- led to the NHL working with a Dallas-based company that will create a mini-warehouse where they'll build the ice surface in a controlled climate.

Bettman was asked if the NHL considered an alternate venue such as Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, but said the venue wasn't an option because the Orange Bowl will be played around the same time.

With the 2026 Classic plans in place, some were left to wonder: Why hadn't the Panthers been invited to play in the game in prior years as the visitor? After all, the Lightning got that chance in 2022. And franchises younger than the Panthers, such as the Seattle Kraken and Vegas Golden Knights, had played in games before Florida.

Bettman reiterated that the state as a whole is in a golden age of hockey. He said items such as fan engagement along with both franchises hosting events such as the All-Star Games and Stanley Cup Final were pivotal to making the call.

As it specifically relates to the Panthers, they are eighth in average attendance and are fifth in average attendance among American markets. A team spokesperson told ESPN that the Panthers sold out of season tickets for the first time in their 31-year history.

"The Violas and Viniks have done an amazing job of making Florida a true hockey destination," Bettman said of the respective Panthers and Lightning owners. "Florida has been very supportive and very good to us. We think it's time to bring two of our tentpole events to the state."

One of the trademarks of the Stadium Series and Winter Classic is the themes the NHL uses as part of the game-day environment. Mayer, who oversees the outdoor events, has a team that has come up with ideas such as getting an actual fighter jet on a faux landing area next to the ice surface for the 2020 Stadium Series at the Air Force Academy.

Mayer said being in Florida is going to allow his team to get creative in ways that are unique to the state. When the NHL held the All-Star Game in 2023 in Sunrise, the league came up with South Florida-specific ideas for the skills competition such as using a dunk tank on the beach.

"Instead of snow or fake snow, how about sand?" Mayer said. "Like we did at All-Star, we'll lean into the environment creatively."

THE PANTHERS' RUN of success comes at the perfect time, given the status of the area's other pro sports teams.

Franchises that have existed for more than 50 years are built up as being something more than a team. The wins, the losses, the championships and the difficult times all get romanticized in a way that lives on for decades, if not longer, much like a classic novel.

Unless that franchise is in South Florida.

It's not that fandom doesn't exist in South Florida. It's just different from other markets, in that the majority of teams haven't been around long enough to develop generational fandom. The Dolphins are the market's oldest professional franchise at 59 years old -- and they're still the 24th youngest in the NFL.

The Heat started in 1988 while the Panthers and Miami Marlins both started playing games in 1993. And while the University of Miami first started playing football in 1926, they didn't win a national title until 1983, while largely playing as an independent program before joining the Big East in 1991.

"As much as this is a Dolphins town, there hasn't been a lot of success for the Dolphins since Dan Marino was drafted, and that was the last time they went to the Super Bowl," said Roy Bellamy, a senior producer for "The Dan Le Batard Show" who grew up in South Florida. "The last time they went to the AFC Championship was 1992. Hope is a hell of a drug, but if you're a winner they will get behind you and with the Panthers, they're the only consistent winner in this region."

Optimism was high during the 1995-96 season when the Panthers reached the Stanley Cup Final in just their third season. From there, they would have only four playoff appearances from 1996 through 2019. In that time, the Panthers went through a number of rebuilds while trying to figure out how they could boost attendance numbers. They believed they could still draw fans from Miami despite moving from the city to Broward County in 1998.

Panthers CEO and president Matt Caldwell said the franchise started gaining stability when Vincent and Teresa Viola purchased the team in 2013. Caldwell said the organization went through a shift when it came to how it would engrain itself in the community.

"We embraced that we had to start building this one fan at a time," Caldwell said. "That was our internal rally cry and we've gotten our staff to be motivated behind it in a way where we felt this could be the greatest turnaround in sports history."

Caldwell said the team knew they had to win. But they also had to do more than just winning games in order to build something sustainable.

It started with community outreach. The Panthers made an impression on the area's youth by having programs such as Learn To Play while also sending their players out into the schools so they could create a connection point that hadn't previously existed. They were also active when it came to hurricane relief. Caldwell said the Panthers have made their arena accessible so it could house thousands of emergency response workers that came to the area to assist.

They even applied that approach to how they handle parking at their arena. Amerant Bank Arena has sizable parking lots and the Panthers have attendants who drive around on golf carts to provide rides to fans that need them. Caldwell said the Panthers decided to not outsource their parking lot operations to a third party so if a fan had an issue, they could go directly to the team rather than a faceless entity.

Another philosophical shift came when the club decided that it was going to stop fixating on trying to get more fans from Miami. One of the challenges the Panthers faced when they left was how they could get fans to travel to Broward County knowing it would take about an hour to get there on a good day.

Caldwell said the team looked at its internal numbers and saw that 60% of their fans were in Broward County. That's when they decided as an organization that while they wanted fans from Miami, Palm Beach County and even as far away as Naples, they wanted to concentrate on strengthening their presence in Broward.

"There's not that pressure to win Miami because I think we won them over with our performance and how we treat them when they come to games," Caldwell said.

At the same time, the franchise was also working on trying to be accessible. Caldwell said the pandemic created a population surge in South Florida that saw young families move to the area. That led to the Panthers rethinking how they could find ways to attract those families and the preexisting ones in the market.

One of the ways they did that was by having the team play on local television while also having a streaming app that makes it accessible for anyone with an antenna or a phone to watch the games.

"As we started winning and packing the arena, all our revenue items were hitting record levels, but cable ratings were about flat," Caldwell said. "That was eye-opening to us because if everything else is going up, we're just coming off a Stanley Cup, how is it that the folks that aren't coming to the arena, the casual fans who are staying at home, how is that not growing?"

Caldwell said switching their TV distribution model has led to the Panthers tripling their ratings from where they were last season, while their streaming numbers have seen a 40% increase.

All the background work that was being done to change the Panthers' public perception was coming as the team hired general manager Bill Zito in 2020. Zito and his front office staff revitalized the roster in a way that saw them build an instant winner with how they operated in free agency, used the waiver wire and were willing to make big trades such as the one that landed Tkachuk. That was further fortified when they hired a proven winner in Paul Maurice to take over as head coach.

It resulted in the Panthers reaching five straight playoffs, with two Stanley Cup Final appearances and the franchise winning its first championship in 2024. As Caldwell pointed out, instead of the players leaving to go celebrate in Las Vegas, they celebrated in South Florida at different bars and restaurants (and in the Atlantic Ocean) while also having a parade in Broward County.

Bellamy said that's the sort of work that lets fans know that the Panthers are stable in a way that feels as if they're not going away any time soon.

"The NHL has now seen that this is a marquee franchise," Bellamy said. "This is not a place where you come to play golf, play a game and leave. They have players now. The players actually want to stay, get paid and play hockey."

## Sportsnet.ca / How relationships between NHL players have taken a turn over the years

By Justin Bourne- January 11, 2025

It happened to me twice in my previous life as a hockey player: once as a 19-year-old junior with the Vernon Vipers and once as an NCAA player a couple years later.

A coach would call me into his office and, almost sheepishly, ask that I turn up the dial on being my typically unserious self in the dressing room. One of them may or may not have asked me to, “Y’know, be your usual clown self.” Both times it happened, our team was in a crisis, as all hockey teams are at some point every season, and I was never exactly sure how to handle the request.

Walk in the room and juggle?

Truth is, I was perceived as someone who played hard but didn’t see the game as life or death, and held himself accordingly. I made small talk with friends on other teams between whistles, and that habit came to a head one specific game when I was with the University of Alaska Anchorage, playing against Minnesota State University at Mankato.

My former teammate of two years and good friend, Chad Brownlee — now a country music celebrity — was with Mankato, and we had won a junior championship together a couple of years prior, with Vernon. He played defence and I was a right winger, so we lined up beside each other at a faceoff in the offensive zone.

“Browns, what’s happenin’?”

Crickets.

“Oh, we’re being super serious, are we?”

Not even a glance.

So I declared “ANKLE.” And a second later when the puck dropped, I chopped him directly across the ankle to pay back the slight.

But Brownlee never broke, and I knew he wouldn’t, and I expected (correctly) that he wasn’t going to extend me any courtesies were I to try to post up in front of his net to screen a goalie and tip a puck. He intended to battle me the same way he did anyone else, plus a little extra after the chop.

Later that same game, I was skating back down the ice after losing a race to beat out an icing, and came up alongside future St. Louis Blues captain David Backes. Few people I’ve ever played against did as much macho grumbling and brooding, and he pursued success like a wild dog after a bone.

I don’t remember specifically what I said, but it would’ve been some variation of, “Jesus, man, settle down, it’s just hockey.” That stuff occasionally breaks guys down, and for non-tough guys like myself, I’m guessing these conversations were subconsciously an attempt to bring my opponent’s intensity down. I would get guys to break down and laugh, or complain about their coaches, or at least engage in conversation.

In that moment, Backes growled and glove-on decked me, which seemed to be his preferred solution to most problems. He was a big fella, you may recall.

From that nothing moment, I took a pretty clear message that I wasn't going to break him down. The feel from playing someone that intense, competitive and almost cartoonishly serious was ... "Well, this is gonna suck." I was inevitably going to take some extra whacks.

There was not going to be any light conversation in the scrums, loose pucks were going to be contested by someone who'd rather die than let me have the thing, and it just made the rink an unfun place to be.

It's here I want to clarify that I truly did care, and tried my ass off. And when the games got big, my attempts at starting these flippant conversations died off entirely.

But midseason, boy, I found it hard to fake the passion.

I like to think I led my team in other ways — and my coaches did too, as I regularly wore a letter — but these two guys I was playing were big-C Captains. Brownlee of that university team at Mankato, and Backes, eventually in the NHL.

Which brings me to a couple of recent NHL stories, neither of which was a big deal, neither of which was a massive sin, but both of which do speak to a shift in the relationships between NHL players.

In the first, you had the Flyers' Joel Farabee ask the Maple Leafs' Connor Dewar for a fight (as he felt his home crowd's energy was too low), which played out with a good scrap, and a thank you to the very passionate Dewar in the penalty box. Then, at intermission, Farabee was effusive in his praise of Dewar, thanking him for taking the fight again, and talking about what a good guy he is.

In the next, we saw Utah's Alex Kerfoot line up to take a draw versus Florida's Sam Reinhart, and Kerfoot says, "Love ya, baby," before puck drop. A mic'd-up Reinhart laughs and says, "Say it into the mic," which Kerfoot confirms he's already done. After Kerfoot cleans out Reinhart on the draw, the Panthers forward says, "Love ya a little less." It's a fun exchange, and a quick Google shows the two played hockey together in the Greater Vancouver when they were kids.

That's great, I love it.

On the same night as the Kerfoot-Reinhart exchange — which, again, is harmless and fun — the Vancouver Canucks were playing the Washington Capitals, which was a true Hockey Game.

The Caps' Tom Wilson and Canucks' J.T. Miller were all over one another, in each other's faces after every whistle, and chirping each other verbally when physically wasn't an option. Washington's Pierre-Luc Dubois was chasing around Vancouver's Quinn Hughes, causing problems, and the temperature of the game was through the roof. It was a great game, with a great finish. It was tough not to admire the passion with which some of those guys pushed, and it was smack in the middle of the year's schedule against a non-conference opponent.

Over the years, I've come to regret the way I held myself on the ice, to some extent. I think I'd have had a better career had I taken it more seriously, and had I been harder on opponents rather than making friends. Part of that has come from becoming a professional hockey analyst and coming to truly appreciate the value of passion and nastiness.

One of Sidney Crosby's defining characteristics is his competitive fire, where you know he'd cut out your throat to win another Stanley Cup. Nathan MacKinnon has been framed as a borderline psychopath for his competitiveness, but it works because he wins. Mark Stone is the same.

Brad Marchand, Matthew Tkachuk and even some pure-skill guys such as Nikita Kucherov play with excessive amounts of attitude, where they take the game to your face. I don't see Connor McDavid taking too many games for granted either, and he's dragged his team within a breath of the Stanley Cup.

I can stop with the names because if you follow hockey, you understand what I mean and agree that passion and a take-no-prisoners attitude are valued attributes, and always have been.

But if the league has shifted more toward the way I used to hold myself, and I think it has, it would raise the value of maintaining that “no friends on the ice” attitude.

Back when my dad played, the players mostly knew the players from their hometowns and their current teammates. There are, of course, exceptions, but even from listening to my co-host Nick Kypreos, it was a more segmented league before technology and the ease of travel shrunk the world. Players now simply know more other players.

“Us” against “them” is harder when guys don’t see “us” as their team, but the “us” is “We’re all NHL players.” Each off-season, players pool in about a dozen pockets around the world to train with one another. Minor hockey teams are less frequently pooled by region as they are by travel teams, where the good players get grouped together younger than ever. Combine that with the ubiquity of phones and tech (and NHL events), and these guys all have each other’s numbers, and most players know at least a dozen-plus guys on every team they play.

As much as Brownlee tried, it’s tough to snarl at a friend in a regular-season game, and he and I laughed about the moment post-game, where he relented that he almost laughed after the slash.

For those who can keep the snarl and say, “F-U, the puck is mine and I don’t care what happens to you in the process of me getting it,” even to guys they know, it’s a huge advantage. In the regular season, after teams are formed and well before the most meaningful games, any little bit of extra juice can make the difference between a win and a loss, and that seems to be where “will and want” persevere over “skill and hope.”

One of our most-played audio drops on Real Kyper and Bourne is Brad May saying: “I’d fight my mom to win the Cup.”

Well, I wouldn’t fight mine. She’s a lovely lady, and I wouldn’t want to hurt her.

Brad May has a Stanley Cup.

I don’t.

There are many reasons but competitiveness is certainly a piece of it, and teams who have players who feel like May might just get their wish, and without having to fight family.

They just have to fight their friends.

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Who is each team's MVP?](#)

By Ryan Dixon- January 11, 2025

The NHL officially passes the halfway point of the 2024-25 campaign on Thursday night and it feels like we all better strap in for what could be a wild second act.

Alex Ovechkin is 23 snipes away from becoming the greatest goal-scorer of all-time; both of the Canucks' top centres are being mentioned in trade rumours and two guys tied for third in the scoring race are pending-UFAs.

Beyond the 'Gr8 Chase,' the Elias Pettersson/J.T. Miller drama and contract-extension watch for Mitch Marner and Mikko Rantanen, there's also the question of whether Nathan MacKinnon — who leads the league with 66 points — could become just the third back-to-back Hart Trophy winner in nearly 30 years and the first to claim consecutive MVPs since Ovechkin nabbed his second-straight in 2009.

Of course, there's also all kinds of playoff chase intrigue — six points separate seven teams vying for two Eastern Conference wild card spots — a host of non-Canucks trade rumours to monitor between now and the March 7 deadline and the first best-on-best international hockey we've had in nearly 10 years in the form of the 4 Nations Face-Off in mid-February.

Today, though, we'll focus on micro-MVP talk and use this week's power rankings to identify the first-half most valuable player for all 32 clubs.

1. Vegas Golden Knights (28-9-3) Even understanding how trying the Buffalo chapter of Eichel's career was at times, it's crazy to think he's only received Hart votes in one season, when he finished eighth in balloting after the 2019-20 campaign. That's also the only year he received any votes to be a first- or second-team all-star. That's all going to change in a big way this season.

2. Los Angeles Kings (23-10-5) Adrian Kempe is tracking a 40-goal season and plays in all situations, but it's hard to say anyone other than first-line centre and captain Anze Kopitar — the team's leading scorer with 39 points — is the MVP of the Kings. Kopitar can become the first player since Joe Sakic in 2006-07 to record 82 points in an age-37 season (though another guy born in August, 1987 who we'll talk about later can say the same).

3. Washington Capitals (27-10-4) Honestly, the Caps probably have more feel-good individual stories going than any team in the league. But has anybody been more vital to the team's surprising success than first-year Capital Logan Thompson. Among goalies who've played 20 games, Thompson has the league's best goals-saved above expected/60 mark.

Leee-on him! When you're not stroooong. And he'll get a goal!

Sorry. No apologies necessary from Leon Draisaitl, though, the NHL's leading goal-scorer who could win his first-career Rocket Richard and second Hart in 2025.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs (27-13-2) Mitch Marner has 97- and 99-point seasons on the books, but he's tracking 113 this season.

6. Winnipeg Jets (28-12-2) Connor Hellebuyck finished sixth in Hart voting last year, could finish just as high or higher this time out and has been absolute nails since inking his big extension ahead of the 2023-24 campaign.



7. Minnesota Wild (26-11-4) Kirill Kaprizov hasn't played since the final game before Christmas and still has 13 more points than anybody on the Wild and as many five-on-five points (30) as anyone in the league.
8. Dallas Stars (25-13-1) Miro Heiskanen plays in all situations and sees three more minutes of ice time per night than anybody on the Stars.
9. Colorado Avalanche (25-16-1) Nathan MacKinnon has not one, but two five-point games on the books this season. What a player.
10. Florida Panthers (25-15-2) Sam Reinhart has nine more goals (23) and points (47) than any other Panther while playing PP and PK for the Cats.
11. Carolina Hurricanes (24-15-2) Martin Necas has cooled from a scorching start, notching just one goal and four points in his past 13 outings. Sebastian Aho — the team's point-per-game, all-situations No. 1 centre — is Carolina's MVP.
12. New Jersey Devils (25-15-3) Let's give Jesper Bratt some shine. The guy hasn't missed a game since 2021-22, plays in all situations for the Devils and is tied with Jack Hughes for the team scoring lead at 48 points.
13. Tampa Bay Lightning (21-15-2) Brayden Point is scoring at a 58-goal clip; Victor Hedman is the heartbeat of the club; Andrei Vasilevskiy is having a solid bounce-back year; Brandon Hagel hasn't missed a game while playing in all situations and scoring at a 93-point pace. But how do you not give the nod to Nikita Kucherov, who could post a second straight 130-point year?
14. Montreal Canadiens (19-18-3) Nick Suzuki is doing it all, Lane Hutson is exploding expectations as a rookie on the back end and Sam Montembeault — despite imperfect numbers — has been Montreal's saviour on more than one occasion. That said, Cole Caufield's 15 goals at five-on-five lead the NHL and that makes him the MVP of a team that — especially when Patrik Laine isn't in the lineup — still needs all the finish it can find.
15. Calgary Flames (19-14-7) We're only calling one freshman his team's MVP and it's Flames stopper Dustin Wolf with his .914 save percentage.
16. Ottawa Senators (19-17-3) Linus Ullmark was cementing his case before getting hurt, so Brady Tkachuk — on a 38-goal pace and tied with Josh Norris for the team lead with four game-winning tallies — is Ottawa's MVP.
17. Columbus Blue Jackets (18-17-6) Only Cale Makar (49) has more points among blue-liners than Zach Werenski (46) and nobody in the league averages more ice than his 26:32 per night during this glistening gem of a season from a guy who — perhaps most critically — hasn't missed a game this year after several injury-marred campaigns. \*Knocks on wood\*
18. Detroit Red Wings (18-18-4) Moritz Seider is one of eight players in the NHL averaging over 25 minutes per game and the defenceman is basically tracking a 50-point year.
19. Vancouver Canucks (18-12-10) If Quinn Hughes can find a way to guide the Canucks into the playoffs in this churning sea of a season, he might push deep into the Hart Trophy race.
20. Boston Bruins (20-18-5) In a place where few top-end players are having the season they likely envisioned, Charlie McAvoy and his 67-point pace is the exception. He remains a trusted workhorse for the B's, playing nearly three more minutes a game than any other Boston skater.

21. Anaheim Ducks (17-18-5) Our one cheat. Lukas Dostal and John Gibson are first (Gibson) and third (Dostal) in goals save above expected/60 in the NHL among tenders with at least 15 games played. They are the Ducks co-MVPs.
22. St. Louis Blues (19-19-4) Defenceman Colton Parayko is on pace for a career-best 45 points while seeing more ice per night (24:32) than any other Blue.
23. Pittsburgh Penguins (17-17-8) A few players have helped get Pittsburgh's season back on the rails, but 37-year-old Sidney Crosby is the constant. He's on pace for 86 points.
24. Utah Hockey Club (17-16-7) Only the Blue Jackets' Werenski sees more nightly ice than Mikhail Sergachev (25:52) in his first year with the franchise. His play has been beyond vital to a team that lost blue-liners Sean Durzi and John Marino to long-term injuries.
25. Philadelphia Flyers (17-19-2) Travis Konecny is playing more per night than all but 11 forwards in the NHL (20:55) and is on pace for a spectacular 90-point season.
27. New York Islanders (15-18-7) Anders Lee is somehow scoring at a 37-goal clip in this miserable Islanders season.
28. Buffalo Sabres (15-21-5) Alex Tuch plays more than any Sabres forward (19:30), could hit 30 goals and still gives a meaningful effort every single time out.
29. Nashville Predators (13-21-7) Just by default, it has to be Roman Josi and the 25:04 he plays every game. That's almost four more minutes than any other Pred.
30. Seattle Kraken (17-21-3) Joey Daccord hasn't played since the final game before Christmas, but his .916 save percentage through a third of December is enough to give him the pretend trophy on this spiralling team.
31. San Jose Sharks (13-24-6) It's tempting to say Macklin Celebrini — and he'll surely end the year as San Jose's MVP — but the 18-year-old missed 10 games and Mikael Granlund has played more per game (21:09) than all but nine forwards in the league and has 35 points in 41 outings.
32. Chicago Blackhawks (14-25-2) Connor Bedard's eight-game point streak is enough to take the honours. Suddenly, an 80-point year in his age-19 season is completely in play.

