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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets may go into 2025-26 with a 'status quo' in goaltending

By Brian Hedger – April 23, 2025

Anybody going into this Blue Jackets offseason thinking they've seen the last of Elvis Merzlikins in the Columbus net might want to sit down for this one.

Asked if he felt the team's payroll was at a point where a contract buyout or two could take place this summer, Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell shook his head.

"That's not something we're looking at," he said. "I can't say how the summer is going to play out, but as of now, we haven't talked about it."

Merzlikins' name wasn't mentioned in the question or answer, but it loomed as one of two names on the Blue Jackets' roster who elicit buyout speculation.

While Merzlikins is one, defenseman Damon Severson is the other. Based on Waddell's comments, it doesn't seem likely that either will depart. Merzlikins has two years left on his contract, which carries a \$5.4 million charge against the NHL's salary cap. Severson's deal has a cap hit of \$6.25 million for six more years. Severson sat the final nine games this season as a healthy scratch, while Merzlikins missed the final five with a concussion.

But when the discussion turns to the number of goals the Blue Jackets allowed this season, it's more than Merzlikins whose name comes up. Backup goalie Daniil Tarasov, a pending restricted free agent, also struggled.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason lost confidence in Tarasov, which led to rookie Jet Greaves joining the team twice as an emergency recall during Merzlikins' injuries. The second of those stints was for five games to close out the season, which Greaves handled with aplomb without losing.

Greaves far outperformed the other two goalies, albeit with a smaller sample size. In his 11 appearances, the undersized rookie went 7-2-2 with a 1.91 goals-against average, .938 save percentage and the first two shutouts of his NHL career, both in elimination games the Blue Jackets had to win in the final week.

He's back with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters, trying to help them make the Calder Cup Playoffs, but Greaves' outstanding performance in the clutch for the Blue Jackets had fans chanting his first name during a 6-1 win April 17 over the New York Islanders to close out the season.

Neither Waddell nor Evason would commit this early to Greaves, 24, making the team to start next season, but his play through 21 career NHL games (20 starts) makes a good case for him to be considered one of their top two options.

He's 10-9-2 with a 2.62 GAA and .924 save percentage in those outings, which include games the past two years for short-handed Blue Jackets teams decimated by injuries and far outside the playoff race in the Eastern Conference.

Merzlikins, meanwhile, has been fantastic, mediocre and dreadful while handling the Jackets' No. 1 goaltending role since 2021. In 244 NHL games (220 starts), he's 94-100-35 with a 3.20 GAA, .902 save percentage and 11 shutouts while dealing with the same roster depletion issues the past three years. Tarasov is 19-34-6 with one shutout over parts of four NHL seasons.

Asked about the goaltending situation, Waddell said the position will be placed under a microscope this offseason to see what, if any, changes need to be made. He also left open the possibility that nothing would change.

“To say we’re just going to stay with the status quo, maybe that’s the way it ends up, but we’ve got to examine this position like all the positions and make decisions,” he said. “If we don’t examine every position and dissect everything that we’ve done this year, we’re not doing our jobs. Certainly, the goaltending numbers aren’t as good as we would hope they’d be.”

Trading either Merzlikins or Tarasov is another possibility, but neither appears to be a likely option. A Merzlikins trade would almost certainly require salary retention and might need a prospect or draft pick(s) added to complete. A Tarasov trade probably wouldn’t return much more than a late draft pick since he’s a pending RFA and the Blue Jackets must make a decision to re-sign him or let him walk.

In other words, don’t be surprised if the Blue Jackets’ goaltending depth chart looks the same next season.

“I remember the outdoor game and some other nights where (Merzlikins) just stood on his head,” Waddell said. “So, there’s more talent, in particular, there that we’re looking more for the consistency factor. Tarasov had a great run last year. Again, our goal is ... I don’t want to be talking next year on the last day of the season. I want to be talking on the last day of the playoffs. So, until we get to that point, we’ve got to continue to look at everything.”

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason to coach Canada at world championship

By Brian Hedger – April 24, 2025

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason will coach Team Canada at the 2025 men's world championship.

Evason nearly led the Blue Jackets to the playoffs in his first season as head coach.

He previously served as an assistant coach for Team Canada at the 2024 world championship.

Dean Evason has added a new coaching job to his resume.

According to a source, the Blue Jackets coach will run the bench for Canada at the 2025 men's world championship to be held May 9-25 in Stockholm, Sweden, and Herning, Denmark.

Evason, 60, just completed his first season with the Blue Jackets and nearly coached them into the postseason with a surprising playoff push that lasted until the Montreal Canadiens claimed the final spot in the NHL's Eastern Conference with one game left on the Columbus schedule.

Getting that close to a playoff spot was no small feat for Evason or the Blue Jackets after losing Johnny Gaudreau to an offseason tragedy Aug. 29, 2024. In fact, Evason is likely to receive votes as this season's Jack Adams award as the NHL's coach of the year.

"One thing about Dean is he's a motivated guy," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said April 23. "The other thing he did this year, which I thought was great, is he used his assistant coaches ... it wasn't always him in the room delivering messages between periods or after games. So, when he went in there, they knew he was in there. I thought he utilized his assistants very well that way."

Evason was an assistant for Canada at the 2024 men's world championship in Czechia, where Utah coach Andre Tourigny ran the bench. Evason was chosen for that role by Rick Nash, the Jackets' director of hockey operations who presided over Canada's roster as GM for that tournament.

Two months later, Waddell hired him to coach the Blue Jackets after getting his first NHL head coaching stint with the Minnesota Wild.

"I've had an opportunity to play for my country, and I've had an opportunity now to coach," Evason said Feb. 7 before the NHL's 4 Nations Tournament break. "There's great, great honor in pulling your flag over your head and putting it on your chest. So, any opportunity anyone has to do that, I know how it feels. It's an incredible honor."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell makes staff changes

By Brian Hedger – April 24, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have extended the contracts of three assistant coaches under head coach Dean Evason.

Strength and conditioning coach Kevin Collins, video coach Dan Singleton, equipment manager Jamie Healy, and assistant athletic trainer Naoto Goto will not be returning to the team.

The departures come after three consecutive seasons with over 300 man-games lost to injuries.

The Blue Jackets are changing up their support staff, have agreed to contract extensions with three of coach Dean Evason's assistants and plan to keep their front office intact.

Don Waddell, the team's president of hockey operations/general manager, confirmed Wednesday that strength and conditioning coach Kevin Collins, who joined the team in 2010, will not return. Video coach Dan Singleton, equipment manager Jamie Healy and assistant athletic trainer Naoto Goto also won't return after all of their contracts expired.

Waddell, reached Wednesday, is tasked with making decisions about 51 people whose contracts with the organization are expiring. That includes support staff and coaches plus the front office staff he inherited after taking on dual roles heading up the Jackets' hockey side in May 2024. Waddell said he doesn't plan to make further staff changes.

"Everybody's contract was up this year except the people I hired last year, like (Evason) and a couple of the assistants," Waddell said. "I told everybody that I was going to evaluate this year and then make a decision at the end of the year."

Once Waddell returns from a week of scouting at the U18 men's world championship in Frisco and Allen, Texas, he'll meet with staff he plans to keep and work out new contracts.

The Jackets' GM will also begin searching for additions to replace those who weren't retained. Evason's coaching staff is also set after Waddell worked out contract extensions with goaltending coach Niklas Backstrom, skills coach Jared Boll and assistant Steve McCarthy, who works with defensemen and coordinates the penalty kill.

"It more important to get it done early for the people (leaving)," Waddell said. "If they want to work in the business, to string them along for another month doesn't make any sense. Give them the opportunity now, so if there's opportunities with other teams and they want to work in the industry, hopefully they get another job."

Healy and Singleton were employed by the Blue Jackets since 2000, prior to the team's first season. Collins, who logged more than 1,000 NHL games in his role, was put under the spotlight by the Blue Jackets' injury woes the past three years. Bad luck played a sizable role, but this was the Jackets' third straight season with more than 300 man-games lost due to injuries.

They finished with 324 after injuries to Boone Jenner (shoulder), Erik Gudbranson (shoulder), Sean Monahan (wrist), Yegor Chinakhov (back), Dmitri Voronkov (shoulder), Kent Johnson (shoulder), Cole Sillinger (shoulder) and Justin Danforth (lower body).

Two years ago, the Blue Jackets set a franchise record with 565 man-games lost, which contributed to a terrible season. They finished 31st overall, coach Brad Larsen was fired and his replacement, Mike Babcock, was forced to resign before training camp in 2024 amid a player privacy scandal.

That eventually contributed to former general manager Jarmo Kekalainen and president of hockey operations John Davidson being replaced in those roles by Waddell, who promoted Rick Nash to director of hockey operations prior to this past season.

Waddell said shortly after taking the job that he planned to wait a year to make changes to the staff and assistant coaches. He did make one big switch by hiring Evason to replace Pascal Vincent as head coach. Assistant coach Scott Ford also joined the Jackets' bench from the Nashville Predators' AHL Milwaukee affiliate and assistant Mike Haviland was promoted from AHL Cleveland to work with forwards and coordinate the power play — each signing multi-year contracts.

Singleton's departure is somewhat surprising after he had developed an impressive track record as a sharp in-game video coach lauded by multiple former coaches, including John Tortorella.

Healy, who was honored Jan. 31, 2023, for working his 2,000th game, spent the bulk of his tenure with the Blue Jackets as assistant equipment manager. He was promoted to head equipment manager in September 2022 to replace Tim Leroy, a former longtime staffer who was fired for undisclosed reasons. Along with working for the Blue Jackets, Healy was picked by USA Hockey to work for the U.S. contingent at four men's world championships, including 2024 in Czechia.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets free agency glance: who might stay, go or join the mix

By Brian Hedger – April 24, 2025

The Blue Jackets have 10 weeks to figure out what to do about nine unrestricted free agents before the start of free agency at noon July 1.

They also have three restricted free agents who could lapse beyond that date before getting a contract resolution, so a Blue Jackets front office led by president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell has another busy spring/summer ahead.

There's plenty of time to hash it all out, but there's also no time to waste. Here's an early look at three things that could happen with the Blue Jackets in free agency:

Columbus Blue Jackets have 12 unrestricted free agents to assess

There are nine unsigned, unrestricted free agents on the Blue Jackets' NHL roster starting the offseason — six forwards and three defensemen.

Waddell included defensemen Dante Fabbro and Ivan Provorov among the "obvious ones" he hopes to re-sign, and there's a solid argument to be made for keeping power forward James van Riemsdyk too. That leaves a pool of six UFAs — five forwards and depth defenseman Jack Johnson — as potential subtractions.

Those who'll likely be looking for a new team include forwards Luke Kunin, Christian Fischer and Kevin Labanc plus Johnson on defense. How much the Blue Jackets want to keep veteran forwards Sean Kuraly, the Jackets' fourth line center, and versatile forward Justin Danforth is unknown.

There's also a chance all nine UFAs will hit the open market and the Jackets fill their roles through free agency, trades or internal promotions.

Columbus Blue Jackets must evaluate options with restricted free agents

Dmitri Voronkov, Jordan Harris and Daniil Tarasov will also become free agents if they're not re-signed by July 1, but they're restricted while having arbitration rights. The Blue Jackets still own their rights, so Waddell will ultimately decide what happens.

Voronkov is the biggest piece of the puzzle among the three, skating at left wing on the top forward line for most of the season and finishing with a career-high 23 goals. He scored 18 goals as a rookie, and his asking price could be sizable compared to his experience level — especially with a listed size of 6 feet 5, 227 pounds.

Harris, a depth defenseman, and Tarasov, the Jackets' backup goalie behind Elvis Merzlikins, will be interesting situations to track. Waddell said during his season-ending press conference that Tarasov, who's 6-5, still has a high, untapped potential despite losing head coach Dean Evason's confidence to end the season. A "status quo" in net is even a possibility starting next season.

Harris is in a similar boat. After getting scant ice time during Evason's first season running the Blue Jackets' bench, it's fair to wonder whether Waddell will keep Harris or make him a UFA by declining to extend a qualifying offer. That's what he did with former Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Bean in the 2024 offseason, so it's a possibility.

Not tendering a qualifying offer to Tarasov would be surprising given his position and the potential that inherently exists with his size, athleticism and resume from prior seasons.

Columbus Blue Jackets can afford to chase impact players

The Blue Jackets currently have 15 players on their NHL roster under contract for next season at a total of \$51.5 million against the league's salary cap.

The ceiling is getting a major bump from \$88 million to \$95.5 million in 2025-26, so Waddell and his staff have a whopping \$44 million in cap space to fill out the roster. They must be judicious, keeping enough available to retain a handful of high-end youngsters led by Adam Fantilli, but there will be plenty of breathing room to chase impact players July 1 in free agency.

The snag in that plan is that a boost in cap space could also shrink the overall talent level of the NHL's free-agent pool after teams use it to keep their own pending UFAs. Should the Toronto Maple Leafs fail to re-sign elite playmaking forward Mitch Marner, the Blue Jackets should be positioned to put the most enticing monetary package on the table in front of him.

Other unsigned UFAs who could give the Jackets' roster a boost in July include Winnipeg Jets winger Nikolai Ehlers, Florida Panthers center Sam Bennett, Florida Panthers defenseman Aaron Ekblad, Detroit Red Wings right wing Patrick Kane, Colorado Avalanche center Brock Nelson and Dallas Stars center Matt Duchene (formerly of the Blue Jackets).

Having a lot of cap space could also help the Blue Jackets complete trades for high-priced players and explore the RFA market for potential contract offer sheet deals — which force teams to either match the offer sheet or give up their rights to the player in exchange for draft pick compensation.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason tabbed to lead Team Canada at World Championship

By Aaron Portzline – April 24, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Dean Evason, who coached the Columbus Blue Jackets to a surprisingly successful season in his first year with the club, has been named head coach of Team Canada in the upcoming IIHF World Championship in Sweden and Denmark.

TSN's Darren Dreger was the first to report Evason's selection. The 60-year-old native of Flin Flon, Manitoba, served as an assistant coach last season for Team Canada, which finished fourth in the tournament. Two months later, he was hired by the Blue Jackets.

Evason said that he was still working with Team Canada to fill out the rest of the coaching staff. Dreger reported that Calgary coach Ryan Huska will be involved.

The Blue Jackets are expected to announce in the coming days which players will represent their countries in the tournament, which runs May 9-25 in Stockholm, Sweden, and Herning, Denmark. Defenseman Zach Werenski will not play for Team USA, he said, citing a busy offseason, including his wedding.

Under Evason, the Blue Jackets finished 40-33-9, their best record since the 2019-20 season. They were the last NHL club to be eliminated from the postseason, but when the season began, most expected Columbus to be, once again, a lottery team.

Evason has been an NHL coach for parts of six seasons with the Minnesota Wild and Blue Jackets. He has a regular season record of 187-110-36, a .616 points percentage.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets offseason primer: 15 storylines to watch as GM Don Waddell pushes forward

By Aaron Portzline – April 24, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It's amazing how quickly the world can change at the end of an NHL season. A week ago, the Columbus Blue Jackets were making a jet-fueled finish to the season, hoping to catch the Montreal Canadiens and earn a playoff spot.

Now, after watching the Canadiens hold them off on the season's penultimate day, the Blue Jackets are fully into offseason mode.

For the players, that means allowing their bodies and brains to recover after what was an exhausting season both emotionally and physically. For management and coaches, that means evaluating areas where they can improve and setting a strategy for what figures to be a fascinating offseason.

The Blue Jackets were the last NHL club eliminated from the playoff race, and their 23-point improvement from last season is the second-largest single-season improvement in franchise history. The sense, however, is that general manager Don Waddell is not content with slow growth.

Here are 15 storylines we will be monitoring this offseason:

Goaltending

Will Merzlikins return?

This seems to be at the top of everybody's list, so let's get after it.

With the numbers he put up this season — once again among the worst in the league in save percentage and goals-against average — and with the late-season, on-ice temper tantrums, it's hard to imagine the Blue Jackets bringing back Elvis Merzlikins.

But Waddell has mentioned that the "status quo" is a possibility.

The issue? Merzlikins has two years remaining on a contract that pays him \$5.4 million per season. Is there a trade market? Likely not for a "hockey" trade, but if Waddell is willing to retain a portion of his salary or attach a sweetener (draft pick, prospect, etc.) maybe it could happen. Maybe.

Contract buyouts are painful, but it might be the club's only out here. Per Puckpedia, it would cost the Blue Jackets \$1.5 million in 2025-26, \$2.8 million in 2026-27 and \$1.63 million in 2027-28, and 2028-29.

The NHL buyout window is open from June 15 (or 48 hours after the Stanley Cup is awarded) through June 30, the final day of the league year.

Has Greaves earned a spot?

You might look at his contract — he has a one-way NHL deal for next season — and conclude that Jet Greaves most definitely will be in Columbus. If you look at the way he played in the NHL this season, especially the final two weeks, it seems like a no-brainer.

Greaves went 7-2-2 with a .938 save percentage and 1.91 goals-against average in 11 starts, including his five-game burner at the end of the season that nearly pushed the Blue Jackets into the playoffs.

Yeah, he's an NHL goalie. The only question here is if he's a classic backup (20 to 30 starts) or if he's in a tandem with a goaltender who arrives via trade or free agency.

Tarasov tendered?

Daniil Tarasov's season was a mystery. He did himself no favors, it seems, by declining a rehab assignment with AHL Cleveland in December. After that, he was never given a chance to run with the starter's job, even during stretches when Merzlikins struggled.

The question now is whether or not Tarasov, a restricted free agent, is tendered a qualifying offer. Those are due 48 hours after the draft. If he doesn't get a qualifying offer, he's an unrestricted free agent.

Defense

Will Provorov extend?

Ivan Provorov wants to stay in Columbus. The Blue Jackets would like to keep him. So what's the problem?

At 28 years old, Provorov has reached the point at which top-four defensemen typically sign seven- or eight-year contracts with significant money attached. That's what Provorov was looking for earlier this season, which the Blue Jackets seem to understand.

The Blue Jackets are reluctant to go that far into the future with yet another defenseman, which Provorov seems to understand. This could just be a case of two sides amicably divorcing.

Provorov's younger brother, Vladimir, has committed to Ohio State beginning in 2027. That's an emotional pull, Provorov admitted, so stay tuned.

Stuck with Severson?

The hope was that Damon Severson would rebound from a tough first season in Columbus, but his second season was more of the same, and maybe worse. He was a healthy scratch 12 times, including the final nine games of the season, which is quite a commentary for a player making \$6.25 million per season.

The issue: Severson has six years (gulp!) remaining on his contract, so forget about a buyout. That would stretch 12 years into the future.

The Blue Jackets have to get Severson back up to speed. He has to realize what the Blue Jackets need from him — a no-frills, low-risk puck-mover — and stop trying to produce offensively at a rate that justifies his contract. The only other option is to trade a major asset along with Severson to a club willing to take his salary.

Man, I miss the Coyotes.

The Blue Jackets need more from Damon Severson if he's still around next season.

A Fabbro fit?

The Blue Jackets' front office will need to get a grip on what the trade and free-agent markets will look like this summer before deciding what to do with Dante Fabbro and others.

They'd like to keep the 26-year-old, though, because he seemed to fit quite well on the top pair next to Mr. Everything, Zach Werenski. Fabbro is a right-shot, he can move the puck and while not particularly large, he does not back down from conflict.

Waddell claiming him off waivers early this season was a big part of the Blue Jackets' success. Even if he's not seen as a long-term fixture next to Werenski, he would seem to be a player worth keeping.

Does Jack Johnson retire?

Johnson, 38, played 41 games this season in his second stint with the Blue Jackets. He's played in 1,228 games, the sixth-most in NHL history among U.S.-born defensemen. If he decides to retire, it's been one heck of a career, including a Stanley Cup win in 2022 with Colorado.

No word yet on what Johnson is thinking. Either way, it seems unlikely he would return to the Blue Jackets ... as a player, anyway.

Forwards

Does Kuraly stay home?

Sean Kuraly is the fourth homegrown player to play for the Blue Jackets, but it's fair to wonder if he'll continue to play where he lives. Kuraly is set to be a UFA, and so far there's been no indication from the club whether he's in their plans for next season and beyond.

The Jackets are as deep at center as they've ever been, but it would be hard to replace Kuraly's faceoff wins, penalty-killing and competitive spirit in the middle of the fourth line. Waddell and staff are likely predicting if cheaper fourth-line options — Kuraly was making \$2.5 million per season — will be available.

And the other UFAs?

Zach Aston-Reese and his agent were wise to be proactive. Aston-Reese signed a one-year extension through the next season, securing his spot in the bottom six.

James van Riemsdyk and Justin Danforth (and Kuraly) are all pending UFAs, and there will only be so many chairs when the music stops playing this summer. Van Riemsdyk had 16 goals and has said he wants to stay. Danforth is a jack of all trades who has long expressed his desire to stay here.

What will the bottom six look like a week or so into July? Anybody's guess for now.

Chinakhov ... trade bait?

Yegor Chinakhov is the only one of the Blue Jackets' young forwards who didn't bloom this season. Instead, he once again missed considerable time with a nagging back injury, wiping out his hot start to the season and rendering him rusty when he returned late in the season.

If we learned anything last summer, it's that Waddell has little patience for players who are chronically injured. Jake Bean, Nick Blankenburg, Adam Boqvist, Alexandre Texier and others were sent packing, leading many to wonder if Chinakhov would be part of a trade package this offseason.

GM's office

Big player in free agency?

It's not exactly a bumper crop of talent, but there are always immediate fixes available. Waddell has said that he and his staff have spent considerable time and energy in recent days looking forward to the market of players who will be available on July 1.

Keep in mind, Waddell now has a team on the rise with a staggering amount of salary-cap space available to lure players this summer. If Mitch Marner doesn't extend with Toronto...

The biggest push likely would be on defense (especially if Provorov is allowed to walk) and at goaltender, if the Jackets do clear out that room with the exception of Greaves.

Are offer sheets in play?

We must first establish whether there is a willingness and, yes, we know Waddell will go there. He's done it before with the Carolina Hurricanes, and when asked last week if he'd consider the same with his new organization, he dropped the ol' "tool in the toolbox" line.

But it's also important to remember that in order to sign a player to an offer sheet, you must have the draft-pick compensation set out by the NHL's CBA. There are different levels of compensation based on the cap hit of contract offer, but many of them include a second-round pick.

The Blue Jackets don't have a 2026 second-round pick. It was sent to Montreal with Patrik Laine in the trade last summer that brought Jordan Harris to Columbus.

They could still sign a player to an offer sheet. But unless they reacquire that second-round pick from the Canadiens, there are some offers that won't be available. Here is last year's compensation table:

Here is the 2024 compensation for an offer sheet signed by any of this year's RFA's:

\$1,511,701 AAV or less – No compensation

\$1,511,701 to \$2,290,457 – 3rd round pick

\$2,290,457 to \$4,580,917 – 2nd round pick

\$4,580,917 to \$6,871,374 – 1st and 3rd round picks

\$6,871,374 to...

First-round pick on the table?

The Blue Jackets have two first-round draft picks, their own and the one they acquired in the trade that sent defenseman David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild. As of now, those picks are No. 13 and No. 20.

Safe bet: the Blue Jackets will not be selecting two players in the first round. Not only are those picks available, they're on Facebook Marketplace. One gets the feeling that Waddell wants to trade one (or both) of them to add an immediate infusion of NHL talent.

Extensions coming?

Waddell has raved about the Blue Jackets' dressing-room culture, how the organization's foundation — young and old — blended this season. He would like to keep much of it together.

As of July 1, captain Boone Jenner will be in the final year of his contract and thus able to sign an extension. In doing so, Waddell could ensure that Jenner, who turns 32 in June, will spend his entire career in Columbus.

Other "foundational" players who could sign extensions when the new league year begins on July 1: Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger.

RFA negotiations

Negotiations with restricted free agents often create summer headlines for the Blue Jackets. To be fair, that can be a tricky business. The player doesn't have much leverage other than an offer sheet, and those are still rare in the NHL.

The Blue Jackets have one big RFA, one moderate RFA and one curious RFA.

The big one (literally) is Dmitri Voronkov, who had 23-24-47 and 55 penalty minutes in 72 games this season. He spent most of the season on the No. 1 line, bringing size and presence. You'd like to see him be a bit nastier, but that may come.

Getting Jordan Harris signed to a new deal shouldn't be difficult, because he doesn't have much leverage. He played only 33 games this season, saving his best play for the final two weeks of the season. And, as noted above, Tarasov could go either way. It doesn't feel like a qualifying offer is forthcoming, but we shall see.

[BlueJackets.com / For a 'special' group of Blue Jackets, saying goodbye was the hardest part](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – April 23, 2025

Finishing two points shy of a playoff spot this season was a bitter pill for the Blue Jackets to swallow as competitors and hockey players.

But perhaps the hardest part? Having to say goodbye for the summer as people.

While the bulk of the team will return in September to get ready for the 2025-26 season, last week was the last time this particular group of guys will be together.

Bonded by tragedy, strengthened by adversity, and lifted by the support of a fanbase and a community, the 2024-25 Blue Jackets were a “special” group according to just about anyone you asked.

“This is a tight-knit group,” president and general manager Don Waddell said. “We had no issues at all. Usually you have small issues. We had no issues with this group at all this year. They did a lot together – on the road, dinner together, lunches together, at home, family things together.

“This is a very good group of people. I always say you surround yourself with good people, you have a chance for success.”

In the end, the Blue Jackets thrilled Nationwide Arena crowds, posting their best points percentage since 2019-20 and tying a franchise record for its most points earned at home in a season. They often leaned on a 5th Line with which head coach Dean Evason described their relationship as “family,” a fan base that was there as a backbone in the hardest of days.

Yes, it was a memorable year in many ways, inspiring and heartbreaking at the same time. The Blue Jackets began the season dealing with the grief of the shocking passing of teammate Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew, and the team honored the two throughout all 82 games with both its play and its actions.

“Johnny Hockey” was remembered in gestures both big and small, from the No. 13 banner hanging in the rafters to the Gaudreau jersey placed in the locker room for every game to the Avalon Surf Shop hoodies and three-star Amiri hats that became part of the team’s wardrobe on a regular basis to chants of his name from fans at the season finale.

The Gaudreau family was a constant presence in Columbus, starting with the emotional tribute to the brothers at the team’s home opener in October. Gaudreau’s wife Meredith and his kids led the team into Ohio Stadium for the NHL Stadium Series game in March, just days after Nationwide Arena fans came together sang “Happy Birthday” to Johnny Jr., and his mother Jane accompanied the Blue Jackets on their mothers’ trip.

“We played for Johnny all year, and we’ll continue to,” captain Boone Jenner said on exit day last Friday. “He’s part of our dressing room and a teammate forever. It was special that way this year playing for him. We mentioned it so much, but he’s going to continue to be part of our group. Even last night, (Meredith) was at the game with the kids. Johnny would be so proud of that.

“Just the strength that he’s given us and (Meredith) and the family has given us, seeing them around has been unbelievable and truly inspiring.”

Many wondered how the Blue Jackets could play hockey after such a devastating tragedy, but encouraged by Meredith’s words, in many ways it was the only thing they could do. The ice was where

they could find the passion and joy that Gaudreau was known for, with the team speaking throughout the season about wanting to play and live like Johnny.

"I think what happened was when we got on the ice, it was our time to really live and enjoy and play," alternate captain Sean Kuraly said. "I think that's what you saw. When we stepped on that ice, it was about being there. It was a group that was present. When you get on the ice and you have fun and you enjoy it and you play, I think good things happen."

Off the ice, as Waddell mentioned, it was a group that seemingly did everything together, no matter if they were the team's 12th-year captain or one of the numerous players who seamlessly fit into the squad after joining this season.

There were leaders like Jenner, Kuraly, Zach Werenski and Mathieu Olivier, who have been part of the fabric of the squad for years; veterans like Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson, who had played with Gaudreau in Calgary and were among his best friends; young talents like Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson, part of a burgeoning core of blossoming skill players whom Gaudreau had taken under his wing; and new additions like James van Riemsdyk and Dante Fabbro that joined this season and filled key roles.

No matter who they were, they were part of a team that very quickly became a family.

"It was truly a special year and just a lot of fun getting to know everyone in the organization and on the team," said Fabbro, who was picked up on waivers in November. "I think every guy can attest in that locker room just how much fun we had together and the belief we had in the room."

Evason has said throughout the season that when he arrived in Columbus, he was told by those from the outside that he had to go about changing the culture with the Blue Jackets. Instead, what he found was a committed group of players who cared about one another and about getting the franchise back to the Stanley Cup Playoffs and taking it to new heights.

He never could have predicted the roller coaster of emotions that the season would entail, but the Blue Jackets are now united forever by the bonds that were formed from both good times and bad.

"We have love," goaltender Elvis Merzlikins said of the locker room. "We have love going on there. From the start of the season through the end of the season, it got just better and better. ... Here, we have family. The guys right now, they care about each other, they work their (butts off).

"I think that what I'm going to remember (about this season) is that we became a family. We grew together. We did good things this year."

The Hockey News / The Blue Jackets Have An Important Decision To Make With Elvis Merzljikins

By Jason Newland – April 24, 2025

When GM Don Waddell gave his exit interview last Friday, he made a few interesting comments.

One of the comments was that he thought he "has most of the pieces in the locker room" to make a playoff run soon.

The second was that he thought Elvis Merzljikins was better and won more games for the team than he lost, but he was still looking for more consistency.

The 2024-25 season for Merzljikins was much better for him. His win total doubled over the previous year, his GAA was down, and he was relatively healthy until the concussion he suffered at the end of the season.

Where Merzljikins didn't improve was his save percentage, and that's an issue. His SV% for this past season was .892%, which was a career low. The Jackets being able to outscore their problems (stopping pucks) saved their bacon on more than one occasion. For what it's worth, Daniil Tarasov's SV% was .881%.

Jet Greaves will be with Columbus next year, and Daniil Tarasov most likely won't be brought back, but what about Elvis? What are their options?

Merzljikins has two years left on his current deal at a cap hit of \$5,400,000 per. They could trade him, but would most likely need to eat some of his salary, which they could easily afford.

The next option would be to buy him out this summer. This tool is something that Don Waddell said as recently as last Friday that they haven't considered "at this time."

A Merzljikins buyout would look like this per PuckPedia.com:

- \$9,750,000 is the total remaining base salary.
- Because of his age, he would be due a 67% buyout for a remainder of \$6,500,000.
- The Annual Buyout Cost would be \$1,625,000 paid out over the next four years, ending in 2028-29.
- For the first two years, the CBJ would save \$6,500,000.
- The actual cap hit would be \$1,500,000(25-26), \$2,800,000(26-27), \$1,625,000(27-28), and \$1,625,000(28-29).

So what do the Blue Jackets do? Don't be shocked if the two goalies in Columbus next year are Merzljikins and Greaves. There aren't too many UFA goalies on the market either. They could trade for one, but that would cost them some good assets. Waddell has two first-round picks this year and seems more than willing to part with them.

Stay tuned. Don Waddell is going to be a busy man this summer and will be making some important decisions. The goalie position is probably the most important one he has to make.

The Hockey News / Damon Severson Isn't Going Anywhere Most Likely, So He Has To Be Better

By Jason Newland – April 24, 2025

Next up on the "What do the Blue Jackets do?" list is defenseman Damon Severson.

Severson, one of former GM Jarmo Kekäläinen's lasting gifts, had a very up-and-down year for Columbus.

On the surface, Severson didn't have a terrible year. He had 6 goals, 25 points, and was a plus-5. So why was he a healthy scratch 12 times this season, which included the last nine games? The answer is easy for me - Giveaways.

Severson had a career-high 85 giveaways this past season. He also had 55 defensive zone giveaways. Severson's mistakes often ended up behind the CBJ goalies, and that's probably the reason why HC Dean Evason benched him.

Severson also had a minus-8 on-ice goal differential, and his on-ice Corsi and Fenwick % were career lows. He wasn't terrible, but he wasn't great either.

So what does Don Waddell do? There isn't much he can do if we're being honest. Ideally, the Jackets would like him to be a better defenseman and contribute in other ways, instead of offensively, like he prefers.

Damon Severson is signed through the 2031 season at \$6,250,000 per season. The only way Waddell could trade him is by eating as much of the contract as possible. Sure, he has a lot of cap space, but would he be willing to eat salary to get rid of him? He could also ship him off with a draft pick, but I doubt Waddell wants to do that.

A buyout isn't possible for Severson, so let's cross that option out now. If he were bought out, it would go until 2036-37. Sure, it would save them some money, but do the Jackets need a Minnesota Wild situation? No way.

The Hockey News / On This Day In 2014: Blue Jackets Earn First Home Playoff Win In Franchise History

By Spencer Lazary – April 24, 2025

Welcome to a new offseason series where we'll look back at memorable moments in Columbus Blue Jackets history.

The first one: On This Day in 2014 — the Blue Jackets won their first home playoff game in franchise history.

Let's take you back to a playoff series between the Pittsburgh Penguins and the Blue Jackets.

In this first-round matchup, Columbus came in as the heavy underdog against a Penguins team led by Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin. In Game 1, the Blue Jackets fell 4-3, but they bounced back with a dramatic 4-3 win in double overtime in Game 2.

As the series shifted to Columbus, the Penguins took Game 3 at Nationwide Arena. But Game 4 was a different story. Not only was it another overtime thriller—it was a historic night.

On April 23, 2014, the Blue Jackets and Penguins headed to overtime for the second time in the series. Less than three minutes into the extra frame, Nick Foligno etched his name into Blue Jackets history.

Foligno gathered a loose puck at center ice, crossed the Penguins' blue line, and fired a hard wrist shot that beat Marc-Andre Fleury.

The goal not only won the game—it tied the series and secured the Blue Jackets' first-ever home playoff win.

While the Blue Jackets would go on to lose the series 4-2, that night at Nationwide remains a memory fans in Columbus won't forget.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Accomplished Something Much Bigger Than Hockey in 2024-25

By Mark Scheig – April 23, 2025

As Game 82 was winding down for the Columbus Blue Jackets, a moment was about to hit that would put everything into perspective. Sure enough with just over three minutes left in a standings meaningless 5-1 game, the moment hit everyone hard. It proved that Game 82 in fact was not a meaningless game.

A “Johnny Hockey” chant started to resonate all throughout Nationwide Arena and the sellout crowd. The fans had one last chance to express themselves to their beloved team before everyone would go their separate ways for the summer.

Those few minutes inside Nationwide Arena was much more than a game. It was an emotional celebration of everything the team and their fans have endured in a season no one will soon forget.

Soon after those “Johnny Hockey” chants rose up, Adam Fantilli put the exclamation mark on a 6-1 win over the Islanders to give the fans one more cannon blast to celebrate. The goal was Fantilli’s 31st of the season tying him with Kirill Marchenko for the team lead.

The goal itself was symbolic in a way. Fantilli, viewed by many as the Blue Jackets’ number-one center of the future, scored the last goal of the 2024-25 season. It was a reminder of just how bright the team’s future is with him leading the way.

Showing how bright the future is would normally be the biggest takeaway in a Game 82 situation. But on this night, that was only part of the story.

Yes, the Blue Jackets didn’t make the playoffs in 2024-25. By any reasonable measure, that’s a difficult pill to swallow especially considering how close the team came to making postseason.

Once the frustration of not making the playoffs subsided, the biggest takeaway of the season would come into focus. The 2024-25 Blue Jackets accomplished something much bigger than the sport of hockey.

What did these Blue Jackets accomplish? They were there for everyone when needed the most. Not only were they there, they were a symbol of hope and reassurance.

Importance of Blue Jackets’ Availability

We will have plenty of time to talk about hockey and all of the business that is forthcoming over the next few months. As important as that is, it pales in comparison to what the 2024-25 Blue Jackets were.

These Blue Jackets were a symbol of hope and reassurance. Why? That’s because they ultimately carried on in a way that would have made Johnny Gaudreau and his family proud. The impact of this would be felt at many different levels.

Let’s time warp back to the end of August for a second. It was then that everything transformed from business as usual to unfathomable in the blink of an eye.

As soon as news of the tragedy reached the Blue Jackets, they jumped into immediate action. They did everything possible to make themselves available and help in any way they could given the circumstances.

Then it was time to announce the heartbreaking news. On the morning of Aug 30, 2024, the Blue Jackets made the news of the Gaudreau's passing official. As you could imagine, the news hit the world hard.

For Blue Jackets' fans, it was the second such situation within three years of a player being taken as a result of an accident. It's hard to think about going through something like that once. But this was now twice.

As dark as everything was, this is where the 2024-25 Blue Jackets became a bright, shining light. It started with the candlelight vigil held at Nationwide Arena. The team along with thousands of fans gathered outside to mourn together and remember the light that the Gaudreau brothers were. Cole Sillinger and Erik Gudbranson were among those that spoke to the crowd that night.

The Blue Jackets' availability in that moment provided much-needed comfort to the fans. That togetherness would prove to be a symbol for the upcoming hockey season.

Then as soon as Meredith Gaudreau said that John would want the team to play hockey, it gave them the comfort and reassurance needed to try to move forward. The 2024-25 hockey season would be spent with John at their side always.

It's here where the symbolism was on full display. Having John's jersey in his stall and traveling everywhere gave them the ultimate motivation and strength to endure a tough season. Then the team would be a symbol of strength and hope to the fans.

This dynamic ultimately helped everyone endure through the ups and downs of this hockey season. Not only were the Blue Jackets a symbol of hope and strength to the fans, they were that and much more for the Gaudreau family.

Honoring the Gaudreau's

The strength of Meredith and the family cannot be understated. What they have had to endure throughout this process is unimaginable.

This is where the light of the Blue Jackets again shines the brightest. At every possible opportunity, the team's availability to the family was a much-needed comfort. Whether it was the team making it a special birthday for daughter Noa or just being there for anything life presented, the Blue Jackets made sure to take care of anything the family needed.

The morning skate in Detroit before the Stadium Series game was emotional. It was the mother's trip. They all took a picture at center ice before the skate began. The lasting image was when Dean Evason escorted Jane Gaudreau to the ice to be part of the picture.

Then at the Stadium Series, it was Meredith who led the Blue Jackets out to the ice at Ohio Stadium. Earlier in the day, the family led the team from St. John Arena to the stadium. This will go down as one of most lasting images in recent memory.

Whether it was having Guy Gaudreau on the ice with the team or the family being part of team picture day, there are countless examples of how the Blue Jackets' availability provided reassurance to them.

Evason on Thursday then declared that as long as he's there, John will always be with them. The team's availability made all this possible.

How the 2024-25 Blue Jackets Should Be Remembered

On the ice, the Blue Jackets exceeded most every expectation those on the outside levied on them. They worked hard and competed on most nights. They fell just short of the playoffs but still have a lot to be proud of knowing how much improvement they realized.

It's off the ice where these Blue Jackets should be remembered the most. Their shining light was an inspiration to many.

The Blue Jackets got to that level by simply being available. As Fantilli said on Friday, availability is a great attribute to have. He referenced this when speaking on playing in all 82 games. But this extends to the team too.

The availability of the 2024-25 Blue Jackets helped a lot of people in many different ways. It continues to help the Gaudreau family to this day. It gave the fans a level of comfort they needed. This team should always be looked back on as a sign of strength and hope given what they had to overcome. They will be forever linked.

All of that is what made Game 82 a meaningful game. It was the culmination of an unforgettable season. It was one last chance for the Blue Jackets and their fans to celebrate together in one place.

In the end, the Blue Jackets made the Gaudreau's proud. They made the fans proud. That's a memory everyone involved with the team can always be proud of no matter where life takes them next.

That is why the 2024-25 season for the Blue Jackets was a success. What they accomplished together as a team was bigger than the sport of hockey.

The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 awards predictions: End-of-season picks for Hart, Calder, Jack Adams and more

By The Athletic NHL Staff – April 23, 2025

With the Stanley Cup playoffs underway, the regular season is officially in the rearview mirror.

When The Athletic asked its NHL staff to make awards predictions in the 2024-25 preseason, Connor McDavid was the clear favorite for the Hart. Now the MVP race seems to have a few legitimate candidates, but McDavid isn't one of them. Instead, his superstar teammate Leon Draisaitl has emerged as a contender, along with goaltender Connor Hellebuyck, to make things extra interesting. Who will win?

We asked our staff for their end-of-season predictions for the Hart, Norris, Vezina, Selke, Calder and Jack Adams. To analyze and critique the picks, we've brought in senior writers Sean Gentile, James Mirtle and Mark Lazerus, analytics know-it-all Shayna Goldman and goaltending expert Jesse Granger.

Note: Tables display the percentage of votes received each month. You can find our awards predictions from October [here](#), November [here](#), December [here](#), January [here](#) and March [here](#). We skipped staff awards predictions in February to give readers a chance to share their picks, which you can check out [here](#).

Granger: For the first time this season, Hellebuyck leads this race. I've been banging this drum since December. He's had an exceptional season and would be a deserved winner. Looking back at the past votes, what stands out most is Kirill Kaprizov's 69.2 percent in December. What could have been if he had stayed healthy ...

Gentile: Same goes for Quinn Hughes. He was on track to at least merit some consideration before his injury. Alas.

Goldman: Two things can be true: Hellebuyck may not reach the bar Carey Price set when he won in 2015 and that bar is too unrealistically high for goaltenders. Yes, they have their own award, but how many forward awards are there? It's nice to see more positional versatility in this race.

Mirtle: I think this is going to end up being a really close vote. Maybe even a three-way split. I wonder how much having McDavid and Cale Makar also pulls votes away from Draisaitl and Nathan MacKinnon.

Lazerus: I believe Hellebuyck is going to buyck (har har) the trend and bring home a well-deserved Hart for the most important position in sports. I was most curious about who would be the third finalist after Hellebuyck and Draisaitl, but based on these results — and remember, some of our staffers are also voters — it seems like MacKinnon is comfortably ahead of Jack Eichel and Nikita Kucherov. Wish we could have seen what Quinn Hughes could have done with a full season.

Granger: The only thing that could've prevented Makar from winning this trophy in a landslide was a fully healthy season by Quinn Hughes, and we just didn't get it.

Goldman: If Zach Werenski and the Blue Jackets didn't go through a cold streak, maybe he could have stolen a few votes. But he, Makar and Quinn Hughes have been locked in for some time. The more interesting element is who gets votes around them.

Gentile: I'm definitely more interested in seeing the guys who get a vote or two at the bottom of the ballot. Could see some funny ones.

Mirtle: I actually think Werenski might have had a shot if Columbus snuck into the playoffs. He definitely had a monster season regardless and put himself on the radar for a Norris in the future. Hard to overcome Makar's 30-goal, 92-point season, though.

Lazerus: This looked like it was going to be incredibly competitive early on. Now, I'd be surprised if Makar isn't indeed unanimous. He's pretty good.

Granger: This is obviously a lock for Hellebuyck, so I'd like to take this opportunity to throw some praise on Ducks netminder Lukáš Dostál, who I believe should be a Vezina finalist. He had a spectacular season despite playing behind one of the worst defenses in the league, but he won't likely get many votes from the general managers because of the losses.

Goldman: Again, duh. Even general managers with faulty processes for this award shouldn't get this one wrong.

Mirtle: OK, who didn't vote for Hellebuyck ...

Lazerus: I forgot we had Darcy Kuemper's parents on staff.

Gentile: He's a really nice guy, though!

Granger: There are so many deserving candidates for Selke this season, and when that is the case, reputation usually wins out.

Goldman: I feel like this could be a good year for wingers to get some votes around Aleksander Barkov and Anthony Cirelli — guys such as Sam Reinhart, Brandon Hagel, Seth Jarvis and Mitch Marner should all get some top-five appreciation. Some of these guys may get docked for playing with elite shutdown centers, but they shouldn't be overlooked, either.

Gentile: I'm wondering if Barkov missing a little bit of time — he played 67 total games — opens up a path for someone else. Reinhart, specifically.

Mirtle: This would be the third win in five years for Barkov. Only five players in league history have won three — and only Patrice Bergeron and Bob Gainey have won four-plus. Given that Barkov is only 29, it feels like he could take a run at the record.

Lazerus: I'd love to see Reinhart get his due here, but it's hard toiling in the shadow of Barkov. I do wonder if they split the vote a little bit and clear a path for Cirelli or Adam Lowry, both of whom also would be worthy winners.

Granger: Lane Hutson and Dustin Wolf both had historically great seasons for a rookie at their respective positions, and yet Macklin Celebrini was so good that he still belongs in the conversation with them. What a season it was for rookies.

Gentile: Celebrini just had a 25-goal season as an 18-year-old, and people are going to be mad when he gets first-place votes for the actual award.

Goldman: Such a fun race this year, with a forward, defensemen and goaltender leading the way. See, it is possible to measure these positions against each other ... maybe we can take this energy into the Hart conversation some more.

Mirtle: Trivia question: Who was the second-best rookie defenseman this year? We had to answer that question for the all-rookie team voting and let's just say Hutson didn't have a lot of competition in that regard this year. Well-deserved for the Calder. Wolf should be ahead of Celebrini, though.

Lazerus: I was genuinely considering defensemen who had played single-digit games for that all-rookie team. Congrats Denton Mateychuk on your recognition by default, I guess? Anyway, this was Wolf's to lose until Hutson absolutely ran away with it the last month or two. Fabulous year for the kids.

Goldman: This is Spencer Carbery's to lose, since he didn't win the award last year (when he really could have). Dean Evason deserves a lot of credit, and I wonder if he would have stolen some first-place votes if Columbus reached the playoffs. It would be nice to see Jared Bednar get some appreciation behind those two, considering how well he managed a lineup with a ton of in-season turnover.

Lazerus: Bednar and Rod Brind'Amour are reaching that Jon Cooper stage where it doesn't matter how difficult their jobs actually were in a given season, they'll never win this award, which is basically the We Didn't See That One Coming award (as voted on by the broadcasters). Both deserve serious consideration.

Mirtle: This one is going to be a landslide given the last two seasons Washington has had. The Rangers really missed out when they passed on Carbery.

Gentile: Easiest choice on the board. Carbery should already have one of these, by the way.

The Athletic / Why are some NHL playoff games being called from an off-site broadcast studio?

By Rob Rossi – April 24, 2025

Hockey fans in the United States might have noticed that something sounded different during TNT's broadcast of Game 1 between the Winnipeg Jets and St. Louis Blues on Saturday. John Forslund and Jennifer Botterill called that first-round playoff game from a studio in Atlanta.

It wasn't a first for an NHL postseason game on TNT or TBS. And it won't be the last. A Turner Sports source briefed on the networks' plans said Wednesday that three additional first-round games — Games 3 and 4 between the Los Angeles Kings and Edmonton Oilers and Game 4 between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators — will feature off-site broadcasters. A broadcast reporter will be at those games, the source said.

Fully covering a game on-site — particularly in smaller Canadian cities — requires a significant financial investment, including the presence of a mobile production truck with technicians, plus the travel costs for on-air talent. Turner Sports' decision to not do so for some NHL playoff games has garnered online criticism.

Though rare, this arrangement has occurred before. Most recently, some Turner Sports broadcasts of opening-round games last postseason were called by a team from its Atlanta-based studios.

Then, as now, the source said, a combination of travel to Canadian cities and Turner Sports' heavy spring schedule were the primary reasons for the decision to go with remote announce teams. All Turner Sports games beyond the first round are scheduled to be broadcast on-site.

Warner Bros. Discovery, which owns Turner Sports, has U.S.-based producers share responsibilities for broadcasts of NHL, NBA and MLB games. This month, TNT and TBS are airing opening-round games for the NHL and NBA playoffs, in addition to a weekly MLB package. ESPN, the NHL's other U.S. broadcaster partner, is fully on-site for all playoff games. ESPN also broadcasts the NBA playoffs and a weekly MLB game.

Turner Sports' view, according to the source, is that, outside of Toronto and Montreal, travel to some Canadian markets presents logistical challenges, especially given the volume of other games its networks broadcast for three North American leagues.

Instead of deploying a production truck and a full crew to Winnipeg, Edmonton and Ottawa, the company has partnered with Canada's Sportsnet to assign 10 to 12 Canadian-based technicians to deliver a "world" video feed of these games.

The world feed is similar to what viewers normally see on TNT or TBS broadcasts, only the announcers call the game from Atlanta. What the announcers react to is happening in real time, and casual fans might not know they weren't called on-site if not for the broadcast's inability to show the play-by-play and color commentators during stops in action.

The NHL, NBA, and MLB used world feeds during the COVID-19 pandemic's earliest travel restrictions. National and regional broadcasters called games from studios instead of being on-site. NHL Network has done the same for some international hockey broadcasts.

In March, Fox Sports took a similar approach for a season-opening series in Tokyo between the Los Angeles Dodgers and Chicago Cubs. The calls of those games came from the U.S., but the video feed was from Japan-based mobile production trucks.

Turner Sports hasn't taken this approach with NBA playoff games in part because that league's only Canadian-based team, the Toronto Raptors, has not qualified for the past two postseasons.

Unless the Oilers and/or Senators are swept in their opening-round series, any deciding game slated for TNT or TBS is scheduled to have a full on-site crew and broadcasters. Also, Game 3 in Montreal between the Canadiens and the Washington Capitals will air Friday on TNT, and broadcasters will be on-site.

The Athletic / 2025 NHL playoff pressure rankings: Which teams can't afford to lose?

By Sean McIndoe – April 24, 2025

We're a few days into the playoffs. Have you had a chance to unclench yet?

Probably not. And you probably won't for a while yet, because this is the time of year when everything that happens feels massive. We watch a game, or a period, or a shift. We overreact. And then something else happens, and we either double down or swing all the way in the other direction. It's both the best and worst part of the playoffs, all rolled into one.

In one word: Pressure. It's unbearable. And that's just for us as fans. Imagine what it's like for the teams in the middle of it.

Of course, that pressure isn't divided equally, and some teams are facing significantly more than others. So today, let's do our annual Pressure Rankings, as we count down from the teams that don't want to lose to the teams that absolutely can't.

16. Montreal Canadiens

I feel like this is a pretty easy one to start with. And that's true even if you factor in the fact that it's Montreal, quite possibly the most pressure-filled hockey market on the planet.

So sure, under ordinary circumstances, the Habs would be under all sorts of pressure. And maybe they will be ... next year. But this season, nobody thought they were making the playoffs and few thought they'd even come close. They're playing with house money. As I wrote about the Maple Leafs all those years ago, this is the fun year. If they win a round or two, awesome. If not, it's a learning experience.

If they lose, it will be ... a sad ending to a wonderful ride that's left a tough-to-please fan base excited and optimistic for the future.

15. Minnesota Wild

They're back in the playoffs after last year's miss, and trying to avoid what would be their eighth straight opening-round loss. It will take an upset for it to happen, because just about everyone seems to be picking Vegas.

The good news in Minnesota is that they've amassed some nice young talent and the cap situation frees up nicely next year, so you could look at this year's playoffs as an appetizer. I think that's probably the right view, even as you never want to go down meekly in round one.

If they lose, it will be ... probably the last time it feels acceptable for this team to make a first-round exit.

14. St. Louis Blues

A late-season win streak transformed them from bubble also-rans to, well, something else. We're still not quite sure what, because they're heavy underdogs to the Jets. But as far as late-season transformations, nobody can match the Blues.

The elephant in the room here is 2019, when the team went from dead last to Stanley Cup champions. It's tempting to try to force this year into that same narrative, even if it's not quite a fit.

If they lose, it will be ... an expected result that still might feel like a missed opportunity.

13. New Jersey Devils

It's been a weird two years for the Devils, a team we all anointed as contenders two years ago. Last season, they missed the playoffs entirely. This time, they addressed the goaltending and made the postseason with relative ease, but arrive without Jack Hughes and with nobody seeming to think they can beat Carolina.

So, where does that leave us? I'm not sure. I think a first-round exit would be mostly hand-waved away because of the Hughes injury, and we'd all put them back in our playoff mix for next year. If so, this ranking is just about right, and maybe should be even lower.

If they lose, it will be ... the 12th time in 13 years that they're not in the second round, but probably understandable.

12. Florida Panthers

They won their first Cup last year, which lowers the pressure. But they're still very clearly in win-now mode, including big swings on trades for Seth Jones and Brad Marchand. And they're facing the Lightning, the bully who used to kick sand in their face but whom they finally managed to stand up to in recent years. They don't want their reign on top of the Eastern conference to end at all, but they definitely don't want it to end here.

If they lose, it will be ... a frustrating end to a fantastic three-year run.

11. Ottawa Senators

They're finally back, after eight years in the wilderness. And with a young roster, a new coach and new management that's worked hard to expel the silliness of the last decade, the future is bright. Under normal circumstances, they'd have already called this season a success, much like Montreal.

Except ... well, here come the Maple Leafs, and a chance to shed the little brother label, or at least put a dent in it. Ottawa is the underdog and a loss here isn't a disaster. But it would feel like a wasted chance at revenge, one that hands more ammo to a rival fan base who'd make sure they knew about it.

If they lose, it will be ... the Jacques Martin era all over again, at least for a few weeks.

10. Colorado Avalanche

This year's poster child for the current playoff format's many haters, the Avs drew a brutal first-round matchup with the Stars. In theory, they should be in great shape, with improved goaltending and the pending inspirational return of captain Gabriel Landeskog. The Stars matchup is a bit less daunting due to injuries and the Avs looked impressive in Game 1, but Monday night's OT loss reminds us that it won't be easy. With the Jets probably waiting in round two, the path is ugly. Then again, if they do win it all, nobody can say they didn't earn it.

If they lose, it will be ... a missed opportunity to prove once and for all that they're the West's final boss.

9. Vegas Golden Knights

The Pacific's top seed is all in, as always. They're nicely positioned for a long run, and maybe a return to the final. But if they fail, like they did last year, who knows what Kelly McCrimmon and his ruthless front office might do?

Yes, they won it all just two years ago, which in theory lessens the pressure. But this team just doesn't accept failure. And they view failure as just about any season where they're not playing in the final.

If they lose, it will be ... a potentially wild offseason for a franchise that doesn't know any other way to do things.

8. Washington Capitals

They're a tough one. On one hand, they've already exceeded all expectations. Heading into the season, they were considered a long shot to even make the playoffs — not a single one of you picked them in the prediction contest — and they defied the experts by holding down the East's top seed pretty much all year long. Oh, and Alex Ovechkin delivered on his goals record chase. They've already had a season for the ages, even if they get shocked by the Habs in round one.

Except ... if they do lose, some of those critics will take a victory lap and say they were a paper tiger all along. And even if that's not true, this year did have a very strong "everything that can go right does" vibe, and Caps fans know that those seasons don't come around often. In fact, you could look at this as the last great team of the Ovechkin era. It would be a shame to waste it once the games matter most.

If they lose, it will be ... a stunning end to a feel-good season that lets all the other fan bases sneer about how they were right all along.

7. Los Angeles Kings

The oddsmakers still had them as slight underdogs heading into Game 1, despite having home ice advantage. That has to sting, but it will sting a lot worse if they lose to the Oilers for the fourth year in a row.

After all, the Oilers aren't going anywhere. And with the playoff format as it is now, the Kings are going to have to beat them to get anywhere meaningful. If that's not possible, then ... well, what are we doing here?

If they lose, it will be ... a demoralizing confirmation that they just don't have a path out of the Pacific during the Connor McDavid era.

6. Toronto Maple Leafs

With a Cup drought about to hit six decades, the Leafs were second in last year's rankings. The year before that, they were such an obvious pick for number one that we didn't even bother including them in the list.

Now they're yet another year into their "can't win when it matters" era, and they're a big favorite against a provincial rival whose fan base lives for beating Toronto. Lose here and Leaf fans will never hear the end of it. Oh, and one of their best players would probably leave as a free agent.

So shouldn't they be ranked higher? Maybe. I can see the case. But also ... I mean, at some point, the story just gets old, right? We've done this so many times with the Leafs that the annual stories about last stands now have to be qualified as "ultimate" last stands. They really mean it this time!

At some point, pressure stops being pressure and just turns into noise, and it feels like the Leafs have eaten their way through to the other side. Win or don't win. Blow it up or don't. A big chunk of the fan base is just numb at this point. They still rank high, but the monotony of this recycled story means they're not as high as you might expect.

If they lose, it will be ... impossible to run it back, right up until they do.

5. Edmonton Oilers

Last year's number one team on the rankings has slipped a bit.

You could read that sentence two ways. They've slipped in the rankings, if only a few spots. And the reason is that they've also slipped in terms of their contender status, which in turn tends to dial back the pressure, if only a little.

The bottom line is that this team came as close as they possibly could last year, then spent most of this season either seeming like that long run was wearing on them, or like a true contender that now knows the regular season barely matters. We'll find out which it is over the next few days, although Monday's start wasn't promising. And while they did get Leon Draisaitl signed, this summer is the big one — McDavid. He's never shown any signs of eyeing the door, as much as other fan bases have tried to manifest it, but another long playoff run would certainly make Oilers fans more comfortable about him staying.

If they lose, it will be ... yet another opportunity lost for the greatest forward duo of their era.

4. Carolina Hurricanes

This is their seventh straight year of making the playoffs, and they've developed a reputation for leaving us wanting more. That's a little weird, given that they've won more series than they've lost over time, including two trips to the conference final. But they haven't been able to break through and play for a Stanley Cup, and they no longer feel like a trendy pick to win it all.

Maybe they should be. The East is tough, but it's hardly terrifying. They're heavy favorites against the Devils, and probably would be against the Capitals (or Habs) in round two. And nobody from the Atlantic looks unbeatable. The path out of the conference is easy to find.

The question is whether they're good enough, especially up front. That's where the Mikko Rantanen saga hangs over everything. The Hurricanes thought they needed an elite game-breaker, so they went out and got one. But when he didn't want to stay, they made the tough call to ship him out at the deadline. That was probably the right choice, but it won't feel that way if they lose another winnable series because they can't score when it matters.

If they lose, it will be ... a second-guessing season for a team that chose not to do things the easy way.

3. Tampa Bay Lightning

Flags fly forever. And the Lightning already have flags, plural, from this core. But they've gone all in on earning more, including trading away their next three first-round picks and basically forgoing any kind of prospect pipeline. They even sent Steven Stamkos to go live on a big fancy farm in Tennessee. This organization is focused on the short term and the short term only.

Unfortunately, that short term is the Panthers, their top rival and the team that's replaced them as the class of the East ... for now. Now the Lightning have a shot at reclaiming their title, and everyone seems to be picking them to do just that. But you have to wonder how much longer the widow will stay open — and whether it will close slowly, or with a Bruins-like collapse.

If they lose, it will be ... not the end, necessarily, but a clock ticking louder and louder.

2. Dallas Stars

Another tricky one. There's a strong case to be made for the Stars going in the one-spot, because they've gone all in on a contender that (unlike most of the other teams we could say that for) hasn't won anything yet. After years of being the West's close-but-not-quite story, including three trips to the conference final in the 2020s, trading for Mikko Rantanen should have been the final sign that it's officially now or never to take that final step.

Except ... how do you factor in the injuries to Miro Heiskanen and Jason Robertson? If the Devils get a quasi-pass for missing Jack Hughes, shouldn't the same thinking apply here? On most teams, it would. But the Stars aren't like most teams.

If they lose, it will be ... maybe the most devastating case of “what if we were healthy?” in recent memory.

1. Winnipeg Jets

If you were going to sketch out what a perfect Jets season would look like, this would be it. Their best player was so good that he should win the MVP. Their other leaders all met or exceeded expectations. They were relatively healthy. And in a brutal division, they managed to finish first and earn a very winnable matchup. Add it all up, and they’ve already banked their first-ever Presidents’ Trophy.

Will that matter? Not if they can’t make a deep run. Even putting aside concerns over attendance, which we probably shouldn’t, it’s hard to see where they go from here if it all falls apart in the postseason once again. We know they’re never going to be a big UFA destination, and they’re going to be on no-trade clauses around the league. Those are big obstacles most teams don’t deal with, but they’re just the reality for Winnipeg. They basically need to draft well, keep the stars they develop and then hope it all comes together in one perfect season. And so far this year, that’s pretty much what’s happening.

Mix in a 2-0 series lead over the Blues that suggests they can escape the first round relatively easily, and the path is all laid out. This isn’t a young team, and the degree of difficulty may be higher in Winnipeg than anywhere else. It’s there for the taking right now, with the whole country ready to root for them. If not now, when?

If they lose, it will be ... a waste of the best opportunity the market has ever had, and may ever get.

ESPN / 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs: Early Round 1 takeaways

By Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski – April 24, 2025

The first 13 games of the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs are in the books -- thanks for finally joining the party, Florida Panthers and Tampa Bay Lightning -- so each team has had a chance to show the new postseason version of itself.

Which teams and players made the best early impression? Who has room for improvement? How will all of it matter when it comes to the rest of Round 1 and the entire postseason?

ESPN reporters Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton and Greg Wyshynski identified their top takeaways off of the first set of games, covering all eight series.

One of them earns just slightly more than \$1 million this season while the other has at least three games remaining on his one-year contract worth \$775,000. Yet what they've done has been instrumental in why the much-anticipated first-round series between the Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars is tied at 1-1.

Logan O'Connor is a point away from being tied for the postseason lead in scoring, while Colin Blackwell's second-ever playoff goal prevented the Avs from having a 2-0 series advantage before heading back to Denver.

It's not that premier talents such as Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar, Jake Oettinger and Mikko Rantanen won't play a role in the series. But for either team to keep advancing, they're going to need help from the supporting cast. That's something the Avs know all too well, as a lack of supporting cast has hindered them the past two years, whereas the Stars ran into that problem during last year's Western Conference finals.

O'Connor is part of the Avs' fourth line featuring Jack Drury and Parker Kelly that has already accounted for two goals and seven points; the bottom six has scored three of the Avs' eight goals through two games. As for Blackwell, he's a member of the Stars' fourth line with Oskar Back and Sam Steel that had four points, with each forward averaging more than 10 minutes of ice time. The Stars' bottom-six group at large was responsible for two of their three goals in Game 2. -- Clark

Can the Core Four actually dominate a playoff series?

The Maple Leafs' Core Four heard those criticisms about their past playoff performances -- and they've begun to issue a rebuttal. In Game 1 of Toronto's series against Ottawa, Mitch Marner led the way with three points, and all of William Nylander, Auston Matthews and John Tavares added a pair of points. Tavares added a goal and an assist in Game 2, while Marner, Nylander and Matthews all picked up assists.

Marner's efforts were particularly noteworthy given his history of stumbles in the postseason. He had just three points in seven playoff games last season (another first-round exit for Toronto) and, in this ever-important contract year, Marner had further incentive to show he can be at his best when it matters most.

If Marner & Co. are finally primed to be big-time producers in the league's second season (as they so often are for those first 82 tilts), then the Leafs may be on their way to actually fulfilling some long-anticipated postseason potential. Because no matter how strong Toronto's goaltending is or how much improved their defensive play is, the tide has always turned with the Leafs' top strikers.

Where the Four go, Toronto will follow. Right? -- Shilton

The old guy has still got it

Whenever Alex Ovechkin scores goals, especially at home in D.C., I think back to something Tom Wilson said earlier this season during the Capitals captain's successful pursuit of Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals record.

"There's just a little extra excitement every time he scores," Wilson said. "Everyone [on our bench] kind of jumps through the roof whenever he finds the back of the net -- which is fitting because he's always the most excited guy on the ice when anybody else scores."

Look at Game 1 against Montreal when Ovechkin scored on the power play to give the Caps a 1-0 lead and the roof came off the place. Look at the celebration both from Ovi and the Caps when he ended the game in overtime -- rather incredibly, the first postseason overtime goal of his storied career.

From the scoreboard to the dressing room to the vibes, he's the pacesetter for this team. It's hard to call his season underappreciated given the fanfare of breaking Gretzky's record, but has there been a more overlooked MVP performance in the Hart Trophy race than Ovechkin's this season?

Here's what MVPs do: They rise to the moment in critical spots. The Canadiens are trying to pull a massive upset in the first round. Their strong third period to tie the game against a too-comfortable Washington team sent the game to overtime. A win in the extra session and all of those ghosts from past playoff humiliations might start haunting the Capitals. Ovechkin knows those ghosts. He has felt the tension that builds in D.C. when things go wrong against a lower seed. And he shut the door. Remember that if the Capitals manage to snuff out this upset bid. -- Wyshynski

Are we currently watching the best version of Mark Scheifele ... ever?

Few teams have faced the kind of questions the Winnipeg Jets have encountered for several years, because that's what happens when a team has made it out of the first round only twice since 2011. The Jets' 2-1 win Monday in Game 2 against the St. Louis Blues means they now have a 2-0 series lead for the first time since the 2021 postseason, which was also the last time they won a playoff series.

Now there's another question: How dominant can Mark Scheifele be this postseason?

Consistency has been at the heart of Scheifele becoming a responsible, two-way center who has authored 10 consecutive seasons of more than 20 goals and 60 points. This season, he finished with a career-high 87 points, while his 39 goals were his second-highest ever.

Through two games against the Blues, Scheifele has either scored or created all but two of the Jets' seven goals. Kyle Connor is the only Jets forward who has logged more 5-on-5 ice time than Scheifele. Even then, it's just a difference of 31 seconds. The Blues have failed to score in 5-on-5 play when Schiefele has been on the ice, and they have mustered only two high-danger scoring chances in that time.

Yet the most jarring aspect of what he's doing? He's just a point shy of matching what he did in last year's playoffs when the Jets were eliminated in five games, while being two points short of tying how many playoff points he has had over the past two years total. -- Clark

It's the Tkachuks' world (we're just living in it)

History was made on Tuesday night: For the first time in the NHL, two Tkachuks competed in Stanley Cup playoff games on the same night -- and scored goals. According to ESPN Research, this was the 83rd time two brothers have scored on the same day of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Prior to the Tkachuks'

tallies, the last instance was when Marcus (Wild) and Nick Foligno (Bruins) both scored on April 21, 2023.

Matthew Tkachuk is no stranger to the postseason, having appeared in 72 games during his career with the Calgary Flames and Florida Panthers -- 45 of them over the past three seasons. But Brady Tkachuk had to wait seven seasons until the Ottawa Senators made the cut, and he made his postseason debut in Round 1 against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Brady Tkachuk scored his first playoff goal in Game 2. He sent a between-the-legs pass in front of the net on the power play that deflected off the skate of Brandon Carlo and into the net. The Senators rallied to send the game to overtime, but Toronto took a 2-0 series lead on a Max Domi goal in the extra session.

"There's no ounce of panic or doubt in this locker room. We're looking forward to getting home," Brady said. "Things happen. You're not always going to get the bounces So be it. It's just going to make it that much sweeter."

Matthew Tkachuk played his first game since being injured in the 4 Nations Face-Off back in February, and he immediately made an impact. It was a negative one at first: Taking a roughing penalty against Nikita Kucherov in the first period that led to Jake Guentzel's game-tying goal. But he more than atoned for that sin with back-to-back power-play goals in the second period to make it 5-1 for Florida. He added an assist on Nate Schmidt's power-play goal in the third.

"What was on display was the hands. He has an incredible set of hands," said Florida coach Paul Maurice, who otherwise felt that Tkachuk "wasn't in the rhythm of the game" after his layoff.

Which means there's room for improvement. Which is scary for the Lightning.

(Also scary: We've yet to see Tkachuk and Brad Marchand on the same line together, combining their powers for the apex of on-ice hockey trolling.)

The NHL playoff format is such that the Tkachuks could face each other in the second round if the Panthers advance past the Lightning and the Senators upset the Maple Leafs. One outcome looks a lot more possible at the moment. But never count out a motivated Tkachuk. -- Wyshynski

Carolina's fresh faces fitting in fine

The Hurricanes may have moved on from one all-star forward in Mikko Rantanen. But the skaters GM Erik Tulsky has brought to the Hurricanes -- and subsequently retained -- are still making their presence felt.

Logan Stankoven was the centerpiece of Carolina's return in trading Rantanen to Dallas, and the rising star pumped in two goals against New Jersey in Game 1. Even before the postseason, Stankoven looked like a perfect fit for the Canes. The 22-year-old plays their style of game -- he's relentless battling for pucks, forechecks with conviction and has playmaking talents to spare. The way Stankoven has cultivated a natural chemistry with Jordan Staal is everything Carolina could have hoped for when he came on board. That Stankoven is giving the Hurricanes depth scoring when that has been an Achilles' heel in playoffs past? It's perfect. And he's not the only one giving Carolina its money's worth.

Tulsky also acquired veteran forward Taylor Hall midseason, and his early playoff performance has been promising. Hall's line with Andrei Svechnikov and Jesperi Kotkaniemi was excellent in Game 1 -- even without breaking onto the score sheet -- generating 12 shots on goal and out-chancing the Devils 20-6. They could be a significant weapon for the Hurricanes as these playoffs roll along.

Most importantly, Carolina doesn't feel so top-heavy now. The Hurricanes have been tripped up before by diminishing offensive contributors in a long postseason run. The way their fresh faces are fitting in, though, puts Carolina on a promising track to greater playoff success. -- Shilton

What version of the Kings will show up in Game 2 against the Oilers?

For all the strides the Los Angeles Kings made in Jim Hiller's first full season, nobody quite knew what to expect once the postseason started.

And in some ways, there are still no guarantees beyond the fact that the Kings now possess a 1-0 series lead following their 6-5 win in Game 1 over the Edmonton Oilers. After building a commanding four-goal lead against the team that has been both the literal and proverbial roadblock the past three postseasons, the Kings were reminded of why no lead of more than two goals is safe whenever they play the Oilers in the playoffs.

Why? Because 12 of the 18 playoff games between the Oilers and Kings over the past three years have been decided by less than two goals. Maybe that's what made Monday's game so jarring yet so familiar.

But to witness the version of the Kings that rallied to win Game 1 with a Phillip Danault goal with 42 seconds remaining? It's something the Kings have done before against the Oilers as they did it in the 2022 and 2023 postseasons... only to then lose the series.

Are the Kings are once again in for a similar fate? Or could they finally have the answers that get them beyond their perennial tormentors and into the second round? -- Clark

Special teams already playing a special role

The Vegas Golden Knights drew fewer penalties than any team in the regular season. They earned the second-fewest power-play opportunities. And yet, Vegas had the second-best power play in the league.

How? Well, just ask the Minnesota Wild.

The Wild took just two penalties in Game 1 against the Golden Knights and were burned on the man advantage both times. That's how Vegas works. They see an opportunity, they take it.

That's something of a theme in this early first-round action, actually. There has been plenty of power-play action. And it has been a healthy factor in determining several outcomes. In fact, through an extremely small sample size, power plays are converting at the highest rate (33.8%) in Stanley Cup playoff history (records available starting in 1977-78).

Toronto scored three goals on the man advantage to take Game 1 of their series. Colorado and Dallas each already have two power-play goals. Same with Los Angeles. St. Louis has three -- although it hasn't helped them to a victory yet over Winnipeg. And interestingly, the Jets have just one power-play goal through two games but are tied for the most at even strength (five).

So how much will special teams continue to fuel some of these matchups? Toronto's coach Craig Berube was quick to say his team shouldn't be expecting to rely on multiple power-play goals per game to get by. Will clubs be able to tighten up defensively? And even if they do, will those singular man-advantage chances keep tilting the ice in one team's favor like it did so completely for Vegas in Game 1?

It's not always a foregone conclusion that regular-season success in any category can carry over to the postseason, but the quick returns in this one show how what worked before can keep carrying the day for some contenders -- Shilton

Kirill Kaprizov vs. everyone

The Wild have scored seven goals in their series against the Vegas Golden Knights. Kirill Kaprizov has had a hand in five of them, including a three-point Game 2 performance that helped the Wild knot things up at 1-1 headed back to Minnesota.

In Game 1, he had the primary assist on both of Matt Boldy's goals, which got Minnesota within one goal with 8:14 left in the third period before Brett Howden's empty-netter iced the 4-2 Vegas win.

In Game 2, Kaprizov hooked up with Boldy again to open the scoring with one of the best saucer passes in recent memory.

"That might have been the best pass I've ever seen. It was unbelievable," Boldy said. "He is a special player."

The Wild built a 3-0 lead after the first period. Kaprizov's goal 3:59 into the second period offered a huge bit of insurance as Vegas rallied. He then iced the game with an empty-netter to complete the two-goal night.

There's a certain poetry in Kaprizov being an early postseason MVP, when one considers how his regular season turned out. The Wild star was limited to 41 games thanks to a lower-body injury that required surgery in January. Please recall the ESPN Awards Watch for that month, which Kaprizov still led while having already missed a few games. Were it not for his injury, it's entirely conceivable that Kirill the Thrill ends up as a Hart Trophy finalist.

Instead, he'll have to settle for being Minnesota's offensive savior in the playoffs, helping to orchestrate a possible upset over the division champion Golden Knights. The Twin Cities should be rocking for Game 3 on Thursday. – Wyshynski

[Sportsnet.ca / An off-season question facing each non-playoff team in the NHL](#)

By Rory Boylen – April 24, 2025

The first few days of the Stanley Cup Playoffs have provided loads of excitement, close games and even some overtime. No one should be counted out yet and, in fact, we should look for any teams trailing their series to bite back in the coming days and over the weekend.

Round 1 of the Stanley Cup Playoffs always gives the TV remote a workout.

For some playoff teams, just making it this far is a huge win. Others have immense pressure to take a deep run or else face difficult questions for the off-season.

The post-Round 1 fallout (good or bad) is still to come, but for half the league, their season is already over and they've begun to face the media and conduct meetings to figure out what's next.

Some of those non-playoff teams figured they'd be on the outside looking in and will now get to work on changing their outlooks for next season. Others were planning on participating in the playoffs and are now left wondering what went wrong and how to fix it before any underlying issues get worse.

Today we'll be focusing on the 16 non-playoff teams in the NHL and the biggest pressing question facing each of them this summer.

Anaheim Ducks: How can GM Pat Verbeek position them to take a run at the playoffs?

Overall, it was a positive season for the Ducks. Jackson LaCombe was a breakout sensation. Lukas Dostal gave some confidence that the team will be OK in the crease if they ever find a trade for John Gibson. There were some negatives — 30th in the NHL in goals, second-worst 82-game regular season power play of the cap era — but when the dust settled, Anaheim improved by 21 points year over year.

Now, there is still plenty of work to do. Despite winning eight more games than a year ago, Anaheim still missed the playoffs by 16 points. But it's about time for them to make some moves and push out of this phase of their rebuild.

Head coach Greg Cronin was the first change, but roster adjustments should be expected next.

"This is going to be a big summer for Anaheim, and I think that factored into his decision (to replace the coach)," Elliotte Friedman said on 32 Thoughts: The Podcast.

"Of all the jobs that are going to be open, the sneaky one in terms of interest, I think, is going to be this one. I think there are a lot of coaches out there who are going to look at the Ducks and say that is a team on the upswing. They like their talent. They like their young players. They've got a lot of them. The thing too is they have a lot of cap room to do things, and if they can't necessarily do it in free agency, they have the flexibility with their young players that if they want to make trades they have pieces."

Boston Bruins: How quickly can they turn it around to become a contender again?

From Cup contenders at the start of the season to trade deadline sellers and a 28th overall finish, the Boston Bruins are at something of a crossroads. Injuries hit them hard, sure, and Jeremy Swayman did not have a great season after signing a lucrative contract. Perhaps a full training camp will set him up better and lead to a stronger season that itself pulls the Bruins back.

But the Bruins started acquiring picks and prospects at the deadline to reshape their future. Captain Brad Marchand was traded, a conclusion no one saw coming in October. Jim Montgomery was fired as head coach in November, then led St. Louis to a great second-half comeback to the playoffs. The Bruins

will be seeking a permanent replacement this summer. Even GM Don Sweeney, who has one year remaining on his contract, might be in danger. The team did not commit to him past next season at the year-end press availability.

This doesn't seem to be a team that's about to curl up into a long rebuild, but with Ottawa and Montreal rising in the division and Tampa Bay, Toronto and Florida not looking to be going anywhere, it might be a tougher climb back.

Bruins president Cam Neely talked about building back better. But how exactly do they do that, and how quickly are they expecting to get back?

"I don't want everybody to just focus on making the playoffs," Neely said. "Yes, we do want to make the playoffs, but we do have bigger goals in mind. It's not about just getting in and getting bounced in Round 1. We're here to understand we have to build a team that's going to compete for Stanley Cups."

Buffalo Sabres: With Kevyn Adams or not, what is the plan from here?

The playoff drought is now at 14 years, so questions start from the top.

"I think there's going to be changes in the front office," Friedman said on a podcast last week. "I'm curious to see how it's all going to work with Adams, but I do think at the very least some of the staff around him will be out. Does that mean Adams changes his title at all? I don't know."

With five years behind him as the Sabres GM, Adams has overseen Buffalo decline from 91 points to 84 to 79 over the past three. Will he continue calling the shots in that seat? Or will the front office around him go through a shuffle?

Whatever happens, how the heck will the Sabres respond to another crushing disappointment? Only Boston finished worse than them in the Atlantic Division and the Bruins were aggressive trade deadline sellers. Buffalo saw Ottawa and Montreal blow past them and into the playoffs this season, even trading one of their former core pieces (Dylan Cozens) to the Senators.

Whether or not you think the GM can stay, the team as built certainly can't. This vision hasn't worked, so outside of dropping back into yet another rebuild, what will the plan forward be now?

Calgary Flames: What is going to become of Rasmus Andersson?

Finishing with the same amount of points as the playoff-bound St. Louis Blues, and with more wins than the East wild card Montreal Canadiens, the Flames had a positive season they feel they can build from. Dustin Wolf is in the thick of Calder Trophy debates and will inspire confidence in the fan base for the future, but so too should Matt Coronato (24 goals) and Zayne Parekh (one goal in one game) among others.

The Flames have work to do, and will spend the summer seeking a young-ish centre through trade or, possibly, offer sheet. But the question with greatest significance is what's going to happen with No. 1 defenceman Rasmus Andersson, who has one year remaining on his contract and is eligible to extend on July 1.

Eric Francis wrote that Andersson's year-end media gathering felt like a farewell, and it might be time for the 28-year-old to aim for a massive payday elsewhere. The Flames have to weigh paying him big dollars through prime years when the core may not be ready to contend against trading Andersson now for a big return he should bring.

Finishing second-last in the league, Chicago is set up for another top prospect at the draft this summer. They also have to decide on a new head coach who will oversee the next phase in a rebuild, one where an upward climb will begin.

At the centre of it all will continue to be Connor Bedard, who followed up a Calder Trophy rookie season with lower goal and point per game rates. Frustration boiled over at times, criticism followed, and rumours became inevitable. Bedard, though, was more optimistic at his year-end meeting with the media after several young Blackhawks made an impression in the back end of the season.

"It was great to see a lot of guys' growth and see what the future can hold," Bedard said. "It was a lot of fun to get to play with these guys, and I'm looking forward to kinda growing up with these guys and keep improving."

Two years into his NHL career, Bedard has one season left on his entry-level contract and is eligible to sign an extension as of July 1. At the same time, the salary cap is set to rapidly jump over multiple seasons, so direct comparisons to past AAVs are out the window. The market is being reset, and Bedard will be at the front of that for his age group (19 going on 20). How high will his salary go? Will he go full term or seek a bridge to maximize earnings? And will he sign quickly after the extension window opens, or slow-play it out, even into next season?

"I love it here and I have a great relationship with (GM Kyle Davidson) and everyone," Bedard said. "I know I want to be here for a long time, so it's not something I'm thinking about too much right now."

For three years in a row now, Elvis Merzlikins has failed to have a .900 save percentage, finishing at .892 this season. He had his positive moments at times, but overall, inconsistency has plagued the No. 1 netminder who played 53 games. During a stretch in January when Merzlikins was made a healthy scratch for multiple games, he told the media he was seeking a "new scenario" which he later clarified to say he had asked for a trade from the team.

Merzlikins, 31, has two years left on a contract paying \$5.4 million against the cap, and while a buyout could be a possibility, GM Don Waddell said the team wasn't considering that option with anyone yet. Could the team seek a trade involving Merzlikins? The market for him would surely be thin — of 38 goalies who've played at least 100 games combined over the past three seasons, Merzlikins ranks 37th with an .890 save percentage.

Meantime, the way Jet Greaves played down the stretch — 5-0-0, .975 SV%, 0.80 GAA in April — gives some hope that the 24-year-old could play a more important role in the crease next season. He was also top five in save percentage at the AHL level.

Columbus has loads of cap space and will hope to build on a promising season. Finding greater stability in net would go a long way towards taking another step up.

"To say we're just going to stay with the status quo, maybe that's the way it ends up, but we've got to examine this position like all the positions and make decisions," Waddell said. "If we don't examine every position and dissect everything that we've done this year, we're not doing our jobs. Certainly, the goaltending numbers aren't as good as we would hope they'd be."

Finishing 10th in the Eastern Conference, but passed on the playoff waiting list by Ottawa and Montreal, the Red Wings took a step back this season. It's fair to wonder if this iteration of the roster has already peaked and needs more surgery to hit loftier goals.

The trade deadline was a critical point in Detroit's season. Coming into that day, the Wings had lost four in a row and were struggling after the 4 Nations Face-Off. But they were still in the running, just one point out of a wild card. Rather than make an impactful move — like Ottawa did with Dylan Cozens and Fabian Zetterlund — GM Steve Yzerman brought in Petr Mrazek to a depth chart that already had three goalies on it. He went on to play five games the rest of the season.

"We didn't gain any momentum from the trade deadline, and guys were kinda down about it. So it'd be nice to add something and bring a little bit of a spark on the ice and a morale boost as well," team captain Dylan Larkin said at the end of the season.

Yzerman is facing a big summer to bring the Wings closer.

Winners of the 2024 off-season, Nashville was one of the biggest disappointments of the 2024-25 season, 28 points out of the playoffs and 30th overall in the league. Scoring, of all things after signing Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault, was an issue with a 2.59 goals per game mark that ranked 31st.

Late in the season, GM Barry Trotz suggested this result for the group could be a one-off and only minor selling at the deadline indicates he's not inclined to have the team take a step back. Cap space is available just about everywhere in the league, but the Predators are more likely to be quieter on the UFA market after last summer's flurry. The fact is the front office chose a path last summer it cannot deviate from yet.

So how do you make sure this was just a one-off? Perhaps it's through depth additions or a change to the system. Or head coach Andrew Brunette has maybe run out of time here and a new direction will come from the bench.

New York Islanders: What will the vision be in the post-Lou Lamoriello era?

In seven years under Lamoriello's guidance as GM, there were lots of good things with the Islanders. Upon his arrival, they immediately turned from a non-playoff team into one that reached the second round. The next season, in the bubble playoffs, New York made it to the conference final and did it again in 2021. But over the past three, the team has been treading water and struggling to find finishers and generate offence.

On Tuesday this week came the news that the 82-year-old was out and the Islanders were in the market for a new GM. Lamoriello had been fiercely loyal to this group of players, even beyond the roster's best before date, and held off on making deeper cuts at the trade deadline for the longshot chance of going on a run from the wild card. It's clear the status quo needs to be turned over and a refreshing new perspective could bring it about.

New York Rangers: How do they move on from a disastrous 2024-25 season?

Last year's Presidents' Trophy winners had a 12-4-1 start to the season, but there was trouble bubbling beneath the surface. Some underlying numbers (high quality chances allowed) were concerning, but then came early reports that the team had put Chris Kreider and Jacob Trouba on the trade block. A five-game losing streak followed, and the Rangers went 4-13-0 over the next month. Though New York had brief upticks later on in the season, the team never fully recovered and missed out by six points.

The locker room wasn't happy with how the front office managed the season, and that leaves the Rangers in a weird place this off-season. Plenty of players could be traded yet, but their most expensive forwards all have some sort of trade protection.

"Do you look at it and say, 'We are the team of a year ago and we can get back there,' like the Messier Rangers did, or do you look at it and say, 'Ya last year was a fluke, this year was more who we are and we have to change it again,'" Friedman said.

Head coach Peter Laviolette is out, so the top priority for now is finding the right person to replace him. But Chris Drury also has to figure out who's in, who's out, who can be part of the solution and who can be moved out to bring about a different result.

If there is a team that might be at the right place, at the right time to make a huge splash, and has a history of doing so in the past, the Flyers might be it. Philadelphia is the only team that has signed at least one offer sheet in each of the previous three decades, the last a 14-year bid to Shea Weber that was ultimately matched by Nashville. Philadelphia has each of its draft picks through the first four rounds in 2026, plus a couple of first-rounders and five picks within the first three rounds in 2027, so they have all the compensation they'd need to get involved in another offer sheet if they wanted.

The salary cap is creating plenty of financial space for most teams, but you can still make a rival uneasy about matching one if the offer is high enough. The Flyers need a centre above all else and, given how difficult they can be to acquire, all avenues will be pursued.

"I do think this is a big summer for Philly to kind of go at their roster a little bit," Friedman said. "If there's going to be offer sheets, teams talk about Philly. That's one of the teams definitely that people look at and say if this is going to be an offer sheet summer Philly's going to be one of those teams."

On and off of Nick Kypreos' trade board at times this season, Karlsson is easier to move in the off-season for several reasons. Not least of which is that, after a \$5 million bonus is paid to him on July 1, Karlsson will be owed just \$11.5 million in actual dollars over the last two years of his contract.

With a \$10 million AAV on Pittsburgh's books, the Penguins could even retain a chunk of that for two years to make him more palatable to buyers and drive the price up.

GM Kyle Dubas' focus will be on acquiring younger players, and his eyes are fully on the future now. Karlsson does not fit into the window any longer, but while the Penguins could find an opportunity to move him in the summer, the decision is ultimately up to the player with a no-movement clause.

San Jose Sharks: How much would picking first overall again push them forward?

Even though San Jose finished at the bottom of the league and will have the best odds at the draft lottery, the Sharks were an overall fun team to watch and have some exciting youth already contributing. But, unlike teams such as Philadelphia or Utah or Buffalo, San Jose GM Mike Grier still isn't under great pressure to push the rebuild forward. That's still a year, or two, away.

So, the build up continues and if the Sharks do end up with the first overall pick they'd be in the driver's seat to take Matthew Schaefer, still the projected top prospect in this class even though he hasn't played since being injured at the WJC.

In the past four years, the Sharks have made six first-round picks, five of which have been forwards. Three of those players (Macklin Celebrini, William Eklund and Will Smith) were among the team's top four scorers this season. Schaefer, a defenceman with superstar upside, was just beginning to separate himself from the pack in his draft class when he was injured and adding him to San Jose could be the perfect fit.

In the second year of their existence, the Kraken improved by 40 points, qualified for the playoffs and even won a seven-game series. But their point totals fell in the two years since and the team was a seller at the trade deadline. Now, the first moves of the off-season were to fire head coach Dan Bylsma, promote former GM Ron Francis to president and bring in Jason Botterill as the new GM.

"I think that organization wants to be aggressive. I think they feel they've been too conservative," Friedman said on 32 Thoughts: The Podcast.

Botterill previously served as GM with the Buffalo Sabres for three seasons but failed to push that franchise forward. He comes to a Seattle franchise that was active in the free agency market last summer — signing Chandler Stephenson and Brandon Montour — and could again with more than \$20

million in cap space. They also have a growing prospect cupboard and plenty of draft picks to possibly use in trade — five first-round picks and five second-round picks over the next three seasons.

After being hammered by injuries to the blue line out of the gate, Utah did well to hang in the race late into the season before ultimately fading out and missing by seven points. Had they been closer, perhaps they could have been more aggressive on the in-season trade market. But with more options in the summer, Utah is a team to watch in the months ahead.

We've written about it before, but the outlook for the former Coyotes is entirely different now. Rebuilding is over and now you have a team that has made oodles of draft picks in recent years, is swimming in cap space, and an owner who wants to invest in a winning organization. It's reasonable to wonder if GM Bill Armstrong will look to move some of his prospects for more immediate and meaningful help to push this roster forward. Could they also be a potential player in the offer sheet market? The timing is lining up perfectly.

Vancouver Canucks: How can they start laying the foundation to keep Quinn Hughes?

In one of the most dramatic seasons in memory, the Canucks failed to build off the promise they showed in 2023-24 and instead became something of a circus. There are a number of big questions heading into this summer that need to be resolved. Will Elias Pettersson be traded before a no-move clause kicks in July 1? Will Rick Tocchet sign an extension or become a free agent coach?

All of that ties back to one critical storyline the team has two years (or less) to figure out. Quinn Hughes is undeniably the lifeblood of this organization -- its captain, best player and the lynchpin keeping things from completely devolving into a longer-term plan. He's also two seasons away from becoming eligible for unrestricted free agency, so every move and decision Vancouver makes has to have that in mind. Even though Hughes can't sign an extension until July 2026, creating a climate in which he wants to stay has to be their top priority right away.