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## Columbus Dispatch / Werenski's point streak ends, Marchenko marvelous for Columbus Blue Jackets: takeaways

**By Brian Hedger – February 27, 2025**

The Dallas Stars rolled into Columbus on Tuesday with a three-game winning streak, an 8-1-1 record in their previous 10 games and the NHL's third-best record.

They've all but punched a ticket to the Stanley Cup Playoffs in the NHL's Western Conference, but the Stars' impressive resume didn't matter at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets scored in all three periods, won 6-4 and moved into the East's second wild card while splitting a two-game season series with Dallas by notching their 11th game with six-plus goals to tie a franchise record.

"We pre-scout the other teams on what they do and how they play, but for the most part we concentrate on who we are and how the Columbus Blue Jackets play the game," coach Dean Evason said. "If we do that, we'll have a chance. The belief in the room is that, and it's a credit to the guys who are stepping on the ice."

Here are three takeaways:

Zach Werenski's record point streak for Columbus Blue Jackets is over

The latest evidence of hockey's unpredictable nature is Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski finishing without a goal or assist against Dallas while his team scored six goals.

Werenski has scored so much this season, especially at home, that seeing his name without a point on the final stat sheet feels strange, but that's how his franchise-record home point streak ended Tuesday night at 22 straight games.

Werenski's streak placed him among some of the NHL's all-time best defensemen, including Phil Housley's 22-game home point streak in 1991-92 for the Buffalo Sabres. Werenski and Housley are now tied for the third-longest home point streak by a defenseman in NHL history, trailing Paul Coffey's 23-game streak in 1985-86 for the Edmonton Oilers and Bobby Orr's 25-game streak in 1973-74 for the Boston Bruins.

Werenski leads the Blue Jackets in scoring with 18 goals, 44 assists and 62 points through 57 games, including 13-27-41 during the streak.

Not all fractures are the same, but what Kirill Marchenko is doing with a fractured jaw is remarkable. He's picked up where he left off before sustaining the injury Feb. 2 in Dallas, compiling four points on two goals and two assists in wins against the Chicago Blackhawks and Stars.

Marchenko led the way Tuesday night with two goals, one assist and three points, including a goal 30 seconds into the game. Marchenko missed only three games thanks, in part, to the timing of the NHL's winter break for the 4 Nations Tournament. His return to action, however, is still considered fast.

Rather than traveling during the league's pause, Marchenko stayed in Columbus to train while getting used to a cumbersome plastic face guard.

"He missed three games," center Adam Fantilli said, smiling in disbelief. "That's crazy."

Fantilli accidentally sent the puck into the Jackets' bench in Dallas when a pass from Denton Mateychuk ramped the puck off his stick and into the side of Marchenko's face.

"I was like, 'Oh, my god, I just took out our best forward right now,'" Fantilli said. "I just felt so bad because he's such a great guy. He's playing great for us, and he's having a career year, so to come back right after the break and cancel whatever (travel) plans he had to stay here and train ... says so much about him, his character and the guys we've got in here."

Mathieu Olivier hadn't scored a goal in 17 games but the power forward ended his dry spell less than five minutes into the game by redirecting Damon Severson's point shot into the net. Olivier's career-high 11th goal gave the Blue Jackets a boost with a quick 2-0 lead and a reminder of what he offers up front.

Olivier, a pending unrestricted free agent in the summer, is open to signing a contract extension in Columbus for the right price and term. Figuring out something that works for both sides, however, could be tricky. Olivier has increased his production to career highs offensively and has cemented himself as one of the NHL's top "heavyweights" who'll drop the gloves. The Jackets want to keep him, but general manager Don Waddell has a projected payroll plan that's difficult to get him to veer from.

Stay tuned to this situation with the March 7 trade deadline approaching.

## The Athletic / Kirill Marchenko has 2 goals, triumphant response in Blue Jackets' win over Stars

**By Aaron Portzline – February 27, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The last time the Columbus Blue Jackets played the Dallas Stars, Kirill Marchenko's night ended with a trip to a local hospital. He had a broken jaw that needed surgery the following day in Dallas. He couldn't smile if he wanted to.

On Tuesday, Marchenko had a much better evening. He grinned ear-to-ear — his default visage, it seems — after scoring two goals and adding an assist in the Blue Jackets' 6-4 victory over the Stars before 16,897 in Nationwide Arena.

Marchenko, who has five 3-point games this season, scored only 30 seconds into the game, the earliest in a game the Blue Jackets have scored this season. He led the Blue Jackets with nine shot attempts and had another strong scoring chance in the third that he couldn't bury.

"We've talked about this before, but his willingness to get (the puck) back and get after it ... " Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said, shaking his head. "It's one thing to just have skill, which he has. But you have to put some effort in, some desire, some dog-on-a-bone mentality. He wants the puck."

The Blue Jackets also got goals from Mathieu Olivier, Ivan Provorov, James van Riemsdyk and Adam Fantilli, while Dmitri Voronkov had two assists. It marked the 11th time the Blue Jackets have scored six or more goals in a game this season, matching a franchise record.

Oddly enough, on a night where 11 Blue Jackets hit the scoresheet, star defenseman Zach Werenski was not one of them. His 22-game home point streak ended tied for the third-longest such streak by a defenseman in NHL history.

Marchenko dismissed any notion that Tuesday's game was any sort of personal triumph, but those around him have marveled at how intent the 24-year-old Russian was on getting back into the lineup as soon as possible after he had surgery to install two plates to stabilize the jaw.

His helmet was fitted with a bulky face mask that protects his vulnerable bones. But while others headed off to sunny climes around the world during the 4 Nations Face-Off break, Marchenko canceled plans and stayed in Columbus to skate and get acclimated to the new view through his helmet.

"I skated with this mask (for) seven days," said Marchenko, who leads the Blue Jackets with 23 goals, matching last season's career high. "First couple of practices it took to get used to what is happening (with his mask), the breathing. Still, everything's fine."

Nobody is happier watching Marchenko continue to thrive than Fantilli.

It was Fantilli who was halfway off the ice and halfway on the bench making a change when Denton Mateychuk's clearing attempt glanced off his stick and rocketed into the Blue Jackets' bench, smacking Marchenko in the side of the face.

"I felt so bad when that puck went off my stick right into his jaw," Fantilli said. "I was like, 'Oh my god, I just took out our best forward.' I felt so bad because he's such a great guy, he's been playing so well for us. ... For him to cancel whatever plans he had to stay here and train and get ready for the back half of the season says so much about who he is, his character. We think this is a turning point year for us (as a franchise) and he's a big part of it. He's awesome."

The Blue Jackets pushed their early lead to 4-1 on goals by Marchenko and Provorov early in the second period.

The Stars scored two goals quickly to make it 4-3, then had a four-minute power play thanks to a high-sticking call on Mateychuk. On a night six goals are scored, it's easy to miss the less glamorous key moments, but this was one for Columbus. The Jackets killed both penalties to get out of the second period with a one-goal lead, earning a standing ovation in Nationwide for their efforts.

The moment where most of the faithful rose was late in the second kill when captain Boone Jenner, in just his second game back from shoulder surgery, hit the ice to block a shot by Dallas' Matt Dumba that was clocked at 94 miles per hour.

"I have a tremendous grasp of the obvious," Evason said, "because after the game I said (in the dressing room) that it's really nice to have Boone Jenner on our team. There are so many things he does. He's our leader for a reason.

"We had a few blocks on that penalty kill. That one, in particular, jacked the group up. You could feel it on the bench. Things like that can really boost a team forward."

The win moved the Blue Jackets into the second wild card in the Eastern Conference, just 2 points behind the Detroit Red Wings.

As fate would have it — and boy, are the NHL executives smiling — the Blue Jackets and Red Wings now play a home-and-home. The Jackets travel to Detroit for a game Thursday and then return to Columbus to play the Wings on Saturday in the Stadium Series outdoor game at Ohio Stadium.

"Going in there and playing Thursday is almost like a little preview before the outdoor game," Provorov said. "In a way, you could count it as a mini-playoff series. It's a home-and-home. Nothing better than that."

## [BlueJackets.com / NHL Stadium Series game puts Blue Jackets, Columbus in the spotlight](#)

**By Jeff Svoboda – February 27, 2025**

For a week, the biggest story in sports was the 4 Nations Face-Off, the NHL international tournament that captivated viewers' attention this month with both the quality, drama and intensity of the hockey.

The next big hockey event on the calendar?

The NHL Stadium Series, which the Blue Jackets will host Saturday vs. Detroit at Ohio Stadium. The first outdoor game in franchise history should be quite a spectacle, with the league expecting at least 90,000 fans inside the iconic venue on the Olentangy River, making it a perfect setting for both those in Columbus and the television audience watching at home.

Add in the fact both Columbus and Detroit are in the thick of a playoff chase and you couldn't draw up a better showcase for the Blue Jackets and the city's hockey community.

"I feel like our fans are really excited to show what we've got here," said forward Sean Kuraly, the Dublin native in his fourth season with the Blue Jackets. "I think the city and the fans and the organization are going to take this moment to show what we have going on and how proud we are of it and the direction that we're headed in.

"So it's going to be a really big moment. I think we're really excited to showcase the city."

As Kuraly noted, for Blue Jackets fans and the organization, the outdoor game has been a long time coming. CBJ fans have supported the team through thick and thin, posting the franchise's best attendance mark since 2003-04 a season ago, and have talked for years of seeing a game in not just a community icon but one of the most recognizable buildings in sports.

For those longtime fans, Saturday will be a celebration, but for Blue Jackets president of hockey operations and general manager Don Waddell, what's most exciting is the number of people who might be introduced to the sport by the outdoor game.

He saw it up close in Carolina, which filled North Carolina State's Carter-Finley Stadium to the brim for a Stadium Series game in 2023. And with the second-largest attendance for an outdoor NHL game anticipated, Waddell expects Saturday's game will be a chance to show off Blue Jackets hockey to a brand-new audience.

"We probably will have, take a guess at the number – 30,000 people that have never maybe been to a Blue Jackets game," Waddell said. "People are coming because it's an outdoor game, and now they're going to get exposed to Blue Jackets hockey. I think the growth of the game is mightily important from a fan perspective.

"I've always said with hockey, we have to get people in the venue to watch the game live. They can become better fans once they know the game and see the game on TV, but to get them their first live viewing I think is a big step, and I think this event will show that."

The Blue Jackets have hosted plenty of big NHL events before, from Stanley Cup playoff games to the 2007 NHL Draft to the 2015 All-Star Weekend. Columbus and the CBJ organization have received plenty of plaudits for around the league for the support of the fan base, the city's accommodations and welcoming nature of the community, but the NHL Stadium Series will take things to another level.

Blue Jackets broadcaster Steve Mears has been lucky enough to be on the call for six previous NHL outdoor games as well as work a handful of others, and he said the impact of the events is bigger than anything he's seen.

"These events are game changers for markets," Mears said. "The whole league is coming here to see how great a city it is for a big NHL event. On TV, even casual hockey fans and maybe even non-regular hockey fans are going to be watching.

"I think the Blue Jackets, especially with their fan base, have proven that they have the fan support to be able to host this caliber of an event. I think we're going to see that firsthand on Saturday. It's just going to be a game changer. It just brings our whole market to the next level, and it's long overdue."

Columbus has a history of hosting large-scale sporting events, both inside the sport of hockey as well as outside of it. The total is too long to truly list, but of note, Nationwide Arena hosted the U.S. Figure Skating Championships last winter, and the NCAA Women's Final Four is coming back to the venue in 2027 and the Men's NCAA Tournament returns in 2028. In addition, the annual Arnold Sports Festival is this weekend, meaning tens if not hundreds of thousands of visitors will be in town to see what the city has to offer.

Mike Gatto, senior vice president and chief operating officer at Columbus Arena Sports and Entertainment, said he expects the NHL Stadium Series to create around \$20 million in visitor spending over the weekend. Linda Logan, CEO and President of the Greater Columbus Sports Commission, has helped stage many of Columbus' signature events over the years and said the community's history of working together has led to a rising tide that lifts all boats.

"I love our community, and I get paid to say that, but I mean it because people collaborate well together, they welcome newcomers to the table," Logan said. "I think about just how special this is and for how many years we've been asking and hoping to host this event. To have it here, it's just another big feather in our cap.

"Now we just have to think of a new list of aspirational events to come to Columbus."

Could it be the Stanley Cup Playoffs? Logan said she sure hopes postseason hockey returns to the city for the first time since Nationwide Arena hosted games in 2019, and the Blue Jackets are doing their part by sitting in the second wild card spot going into tonight's action.

Columbus also loves a winner, and the city has had plenty to cheer about in recent seasons. Not only is Ohio Stadium the home of the 2004 college football national champions, the Columbus Crew captured MLS Cup in 2023, and even both Ohio State hockey teams – which host games this weekend – are in the top 10 of the rankings

In other words, the timing couldn't be better for an event like this to showcase the Blue Jackets, the hockey community and the city of Columbus, and CBJ players expect Ohio Stadium to be the perfect stage.

"Getting a chance to host a game like this and doing it in conjunction with Ohio State at their stadium, which is a source of pride for a lot of people around Columbus that's obviously very nationally recognized with them winning the national championship this year, I think that will be cool to showcase itself as a city," said James van Riemsdyk, who is set to play in his NHL-record eighth outdoor game.

"People have been great to me since I've been here. It's nice to see that the city will get a chance to showcase itself and show what it has and show the pride they have for the Blue Jackets."

## **BlueJackets.com / Stadium Series brings hockey home for Ohio State's president**

**By Garrison McDaniel – February 27, 2025**

The 17th President of Ohio State University, Walter “Ted” Carter Jr., will see his favorite sport be played in historic Ohio Stadium for the first time in its 103-year history.

Carter has always been a hockey fan and played the sport throughout his childhood in Rhode Island, going on to letter for four years at the United States Naval Academy. Graduating from Top Gun school before a decorated military career, he was even known as “Slapshot” in his military days.

Now the university president has watched with a keen eye as the ‘Shoe has transformed into an ice rink for Saturday’s NHL Stadium Series game between the Blue Jackets and Red Wings.

“I grew up playing hockey since I was 3 years old,” he said. “I grew up on a pond. I learned how to play hockey outside, and then I played pretty much all my life. I’ve lived ice hockey all my life.”

This will not be the first Stadium Series game Carter has been lucky enough to be a part of. When he was superintendent of the Naval Academy, the school hosted the 2018 Stadium Series game that saw the Washington Capitals defeat the Toronto Maple Leafs, 5-2, in front of nearly 30,000 fans at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium.

Months later, the Capitals would go on to hoist the Stanley Cup.

“It was 100 times better than I ever imagined it would be,” said Carter, who took over as Ohio State president in January 2024. “The Washington Capitals were kind of right where the Blue Jackets are now competing for a playoff spot. They end up winning that game ... and win the Stanley Cup that year.”

From being a lifelong fan of the sport, Carter understands how important this game is for the NHL standings, as both teams are jostling for a playoff spot. Going into tomorrow night’s game in Detroit between the two teams, the Red Wings hold the first wild card spot with Columbus in the second spot, just two points behind.

“We get to see them before they come here, so that two-game series, I think, might help define what the future for the Blue Jackets is going into the Stanley Cup run,” Carter said.

Given his background in the sport, Carter said he hopes to be able to lace on the skates and take a few laps around the Horseshoe at some point during the weekend’s festivities. And when gametime comes, he said he is excited for players to experience hockey outside, something most NHLers grew up with and something he himself knows all too well.

“I remember getting on a pond, you know, 8 o’clock in the morning, coming home at sunset, my feet being frozen,” he said. “Every hockey player has gone through that, and that’s what brings the fun out for these great players that get to go be outside.”

Seeing the magnitude of a Stadium Series event in 2018, the president urges all who are able to make it out to the ‘Shoe for this much-anticipated game.

“If you’re wondering about whether or not to come to this, buy a ticket,” he said. “This is historic. It’s going to be an experience you’ve never seen before.”



## The Hockey News / Zach Werenski's Historic Home Points Streak Ends At 22 Games As Blue Jackets Beat Dallas To Move Back Into A Playoff Spot

**By Jason Newland – February 27, 2025**

Kirill Marchenko(22, 23), Mathieu Olivier(11), Ivan Provorov(7), James van Riemsdyk(12), and Adam Fantilli(17) scored for the high-powered Jackets, while Elvis Merzljkins stopped 19 of 23 Dallas shots in the 6-4 CBJ win.

The Dallas Stars are an elite team, and the Jackets jumped on them early. Just 30 seconds into the game Kirill Marchenko scored to put the Jackets up. From there, it was hold on tight time.

At one point the CBJ were up 4-1 but allowed Dallas to score the next two to tighten up the game. Thankfully for Columbus, they buckled down in the third to pull out the win.

The win gives the Jackets a record of 28-22-8 with 64 points. The win also moves them into the second wild card spot once again.

Zach Werenski probably doesn't care, but his historic home points streak came to an end last night by failing to register a point against the Stars. The streak tied Phil Housley for the third-longest by a defenseman in NHL history, trailing only Bobby Orr and Paul Coffey. It was also the fourth-longest home point streak by an active player in the league with only Nathan MacKinnon (35 GP in 2023-24), Connor McDavid (26 GP in 2023-24), and Nikita Kucherov (24 GP in 2022-23) having a longer streak.

### **Player Stats**

- Kirill Marchenko had 2 goals and an assist. He now has 59 points, and 4 points in his last two games.
- Mathieu Olivier scored his 11th goals and had 7 hits.
- Ivan Provorov had a goal, assist and had 5 shots.
- James van Riemsdyk scored a goal and had 2 shots.
- Adam Fantilli scored a goal, an assist, 3 shots, and 3 hits.
- Dmitri Voronkov had 2 assists.
- Kent Johnson picked up his 20th assist.
- Boone Jenner tallied his 2nd assist in as many games since coming back from injury.

### **Team Stats**

- The Jackets power play went scoreless on two tries.
- The Blue Jackets PK stopped all three Dallas man advantages.
- Columbus won 47.2% of the faceoffs.
- The Blue Jackets are now 7-1-1 in the last nine games at Nationwide Arena.
- Columbus scored six goals tonight for the 11th time this season, tying the franchise record set during the 2018-19 season.
- The CBJ are now 22-9-5 when scoring first this season.

**What's Next:** The Blue Jackets travel to Detroit on Thursday for the first of two games between the two teams this week.

## The Hockey News / Revisiting The Columbus Blue Jackets First Trade In Franchise History

**By Spencer Lazary – February 27, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets have been a franchise in the NHL for the last 25 years. In 2000, they formed, and on May 11, 2000, they made their first trade in history.

The Columbus Blue Jackets traded a 2000 4th-round pick (#98 – Jonas Ronnqvist) and a 2000 9th-round pick (#264 – Dmitri Altarev) for Chris Nielsen.

Unfortunately, Nielsen only played 52 games in the NHL. He appeared in 29 games in 2000-01 with the Blue Jackets and recorded four goals and five assists for nine points.

In 2001-02, he played in 23 games with Columbus and scored two goals and three assists for five points.

Over those 52 games, he scored a total of six goals and eight assists for 14 points.

After the 2001-02 season, Nielsen never played another game in the NHL. He spent three seasons in the AHL before jumping to the DEL in Germany.

As for Jonas Ronnqvist and Dmitri Altarev, only Ronnqvist played in the NHL. During the 2000-01 season, he played 38 games with the Anaheim Mighty Ducks and recorded four assists. Altarev never left Russia and spent his entire career playing in the KHL.

Considering the state of the Blue Jackets after their expansion draft, their team didn't have a ton of well-known players, and it shows with this trade.

They made 11 trades in their first year of existence, and none were bigger than acquiring Marc Denis from the Colorado Avalanche in June of 2000 for a 2000 2nd-round pick (#32 – Tomas Kurka).

Some of those 11 deals were agreements to select or to not select certain players in the expansion draft.

Although their first trade in franchise history was not the best, they have gone on to make some pretty good trades to help alter the organization for the better.

## The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Speaks On Losing His Historic Home Points Streak And How He Looked At It

**By Jason Newland – February 27, 2025**

Last night, against the Dallas Stars, defenseman Zach Werenski entered with a 22-game home points streak, the third-longest in NHL history. If we're being honest, this is no easy feat.

The Jackets would beat the Stars 6-4, but Werenski would lose his streak after not registering a single point.

Today, he appeared on 97.1 The Fan's Rothman & Ice for his "Hockey & Hounds" segment and was asked about the streak and his feelings about it.

Werenski says, "Yeah, it was cool. I think it's one of those things where I really didn't care too much about it until I got to like, maybe game 19 or 20. I feel like leading up to that, I really didn't think I'd even come close to the record. But, things just kind of fell my way right? A lot has to go right for a streak like that to happen. It wasn't all me, a lot of it was my teammates and some lucky bounces. But, yeah a little disappointed, it's one of those things where I don't really care, I didn't lose sleep over it or anything, but it would've been cool to kind of make a push for it. But, I'll take the win last night, I'll take the two points for our team and just move forward now."

As always, Zach is a constant professional and answers his questions like one. The streak was impressive, and one we may not see again in the NHL for a long time. He can be modest all he wants, but in the people's eyes who follow Columbus, they are extremely saddened that the streak was snapped.

**What's Next:** The Blue Jackets travel to Detroit on Thursday for the first of two games between the two teams this week.

## The Hockey News / Revisiting The Columbus Blue Jackets Expansion Draft in 2000

**By Spencer Lazary – February 27, 2025**

Before the 2000 NHL season, both the Minnesota Wild and Columbus Blue Jackets participated in an expansion draft to select their rosters.

Both teams were given a pool of players to choose from, which would make up their inaugural season roster—unless they made changes in the offseason.

For both clubs, it wasn't the best pool of players, not even close to how it was set up when the Vegas Golden Knights entered the NHL. The available players weren't overly skilled, which resulted in both teams coming out of the expansion draft with rosters that weren't very competitive.

For the Blue Jackets, they selected a total of three goaltenders, eight defensemen, and 15 forwards.

### **Here was their picks:**

#### **Forwards**

Kevyn Adams (TOR)

Kevin Dineen (OTT)

Dallas Drake (PHX)

Ted Drury (NYI)

Bruce Gardiner (TBL)

Steve Heinze (BOS)

Robert Kron (CAR)

Sergei Luchinkin (DAL)

Barrie Moore (WSH)

Geoff Sanderson (BUF)

Turner Stevenson (MTL)

Martin Streit (PHI)

Dmitri Subbotin (NYR)

Jeff Williams (NJD)

Tyler Wright (PIT)

#### **Defensemen**

Jonas Andersson-Junkka (PIT)

Radim Bicanek (CHI)

Lyle Odelein (PHX)

Jamie Pushor (DAL)

Tommi Rajamaki (TOR)

Bert Robertsson (EDM)

Mathieu Schneider (NYR)

Mattias Timander (BOS)

### **Goaltenders**

Frederic Chabot (MTL)

Dwayne Roloson (BUF)

Rick Tabaracci (COL)

The Blue Jackets took Rick Tabaracci with the first pick in the expansion draft, and then it was the Wild's turn to pick. The draft was set up for the Blue Jackets to start with one pick, followed by the Wild selecting twice, then Columbus picking twice, and so on.

During the expansion draft, the Blue Jackets made a few deals that later turned out to be questionable.

### **Here are the trades and the stipulations on each trade:**

- San Jose traded Jan Caloun, a ninth-round pick (Martin Paroulek) in the 2000 NHL Entry Draft, and a conditional pick in the 2001 NHL Entry Draft to Columbus on June 11, 2000, after the Blue Jackets agreed not to select Evgeni Nabokov.
- Buffalo traded Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre, Matt Davidson, and two fifth-round draft picks—one in 2000 (Tyler Kolarik) and one in 2001 (Andreas Jamtin)—to Columbus on June 23, 2000, after the Blue Jackets agreed not to select Dominik Hasek or Martin Biron.

Yes, that's right—the Blue Jackets could have had Hasek, Biron, or Nabokov, but they made deals agreeing not to take those players.

After the draft ended, the offseason continued with free agency and the NHL Draft. In free agency, the Blue Jackets saw a few of their expansion picks leave:

- Dallas Drake (signed by St. Louis on July 1, 2000)
- Mathieu Schneider (signed by Los Angeles on August 13, 2000)
- Dwayne Roloson (signed with AHL's Worcester IceCats)

There are some theories that all three of these players refused to play for the Blue Jackets. However, upon further research, I couldn't find conclusive evidence. All I could find is that they agreed to contracts with other teams and moved on from the organization before playing a game.

Looking ahead to the 2000 NHL Draft, the Blue Jackets had 11 picks to use.

**R1 P4: Rostislav Klesla - D**

**R3 P4: Ben Knopp - RW**

**R5 P3: Petteri Nummelin - D**

**R5 P8: Scott Heffernan - D (From BOS)**

**R5 P20: Tyler Kolarik - C (From SJS)**

**R6 P2: Shane Bendera - G**

**R7 P3: Janne Jokila - LW**

**R8 P2: Peter Zingoni - C**

**R9 P17: Martin Paroulek - RW (From SJS)**

**R9 P25: Andrej Nedorost - C (From FLA)**

**R9 P31: Louis Manderville - D (From DET)**

Lastly, the free agent signings, although it was hard to find, there was one that was notable. They signed goaltender Ron Tugnutt, who previously played for the Pittsburgh Penguins. He went on to be their starter for two seasons before being traded to the Dallas Stars.

Overall, the team went 28-39-6 and finished last in their division. They used their first round pick to select goaltender Pascal Leclaire. The next season, they would also do terrible which landed them the first overall pick. They used that pick to select Rick Nash who would quickly become the face of their franchise.

## The Hockey Writers / 3 Blue Jackets' Trade Targets at 2025 NHL Trade Deadline

**By Nicholas Arnold – February 27, 2025**

We're at the critical juncture of the season, just less than two weeks from the NHL's trade deadline on March 7. The Columbus Blue Jackets have had a season worthy of adding to chase their first playoff berth since the pandemic. Their general manager (GM) Don Waddell has reportedly said he expects the team to be "moderate buyers" and it's speculated he'll look to add a top-nine forward to bolster his team's depth.

Here we'll look at three players who Waddell could choose to chase. They'll all possibly have some sort of impact, while likely costing a less than substantial haul. To define the term and the exercise, we'll be looking at players who could likely be added for a third-round or later pick and anything less than a top-ten prospect in their system.

### **Gustav Nyquist**

Gustav Nyquist just makes sense for Columbus. He was a longer-term member of the team a couple of seasons ago and was a great fit. He knows the city, a majority of the core, and he was the team's most reliable forward through a very tumultuous Brad Larsen era. While he is having a down campaign with the struggling Nashville Predators at 35 years old, last season he put up a career high in points with 75. I wouldn't be uber concerned about Gus.

When Nyquist is on his game, he's super smart and capable of playing anywhere in the lineup from the first line to the fourth. He can be used along the wall on a power play and was one of the Blue Jackets' busier penalty-killers during his tenure. I can find no reason why a reunion with their former alternate captain does not make sense for Columbus – if it's at a reasonable price. There's no reason why a third-round or later draft pick and/or a lower-level prospect couldn't facilitate this deal.

### **Joel Armia**

I know the Blue Jackets don't have a great recent history with Finns – looking at you Patrik Laine – but his Montreal Canadiens' teammate, Joel Armia, could be the piece they're looking for. Armia at his best is good for around 10-15 goals and 25-30 points in a season. He's got a great shot and is capable of hopping in on the Blue Jackets' penalty kill should he be needed. Ultimately, he'd be a decent third unit or more likely fourth-line addition.

Where Armia differentiates from some other options is that he's got some playoff experience. And he's no shrinking violet in the postseason, tied for fifth in team scoring when the Canadiens made their miracle run to the Stanley Cup Final during the COVID-shortened season. Some deep playoff experience and a reliable pro with almost 600 games in the NHL could be the reason Waddell adds the 6-foot-3 Finnish winger.

### **Jordan Greenway**

Jordan Greenway would be a wild addition to the Blue Jackets for one reason: One of the more ready-made playoff forward lines in hockey. You put out a fourth line that is tough as nails center Sean Kuraly, the speedy, fisticuffs-doling, feisty Frenchman, Mathieu Olivier, and add 6-foot-6, 235-pound, Greenway from the Buffalo Sabres to the other side. Holy smokes.

Yes, Greenway has his limitations. He's not the beast of a top-six forward that many hoped he would be when he was drafted in 2015. However, teams often talk about rehabilitating talent, and that's exactly what the former Boston College star and member of the US National Team Development Program had



once been lauded as possessing. This season, he's been crushed by injuries with the Sabres. Playing in the team's return from the 4 Nations break, it was his first game since Dec. 15. He's had an assist and 12 hits through the first two games back.

Physicality would be his main asset to the Blue Jackets. Among the 421 forwards with more than 100 games played over the last three seasons, he's 87th with 7.94 hits per 60 minutes of ice time. He's also a sneaky good shot blocker – I guess it's hard to miss that huge frame. Statistically, he's 43rd with those same parameters at 3.19 shots blocked per 60 minutes of ice time. He's also led the Sabres in shorthanded ice time with 2:34 per game over that time. All of that adds up to a decent add to any playoff team's fourth line and penalty kill. If Columbus doesn't get sucked into any kind of bidding war, they could stand to add him for a reasonable and unsubstantial price.

Honestly, the Blue Jackets don't really need a huge addition to their lineup as they continue to chase their first playoff appearance since 2020. They've got enough players that can help fill the gaps created by injuries within their system already. So if GM Waddell is planning to add at the deadline, it shouldn't be at the cost of their future. Nyquist, Armia, and Greenway are three players that the Blue Jackets could look to add at a relatively unsubstantial cost that might help them through the gauntlet toward game 82.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Fast Start, Marchenko X 2, Making Just Enough Saves

**By Will Chase – February 27, 2025**

They keep finding a way.

Kirill Marchenko had a three-point game with two goals and an assist as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the Dallas Stars 6-4 on Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena.

### **Zach Werenski's 22-game home point streak came to an end**

#### **Fast Start**

The Blue Jackets came away with a 5-1 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday but the players, led by Werenski, wanted to play better and get off to a quicker start.

Mission accomplished.

Kirill Marchenko scored 30 seconds into the game — Columbus's fastest goal this season — to give the Jackets the early 1-0 lead. The goal is his team-leading 22nd. Ivan Provorov (20) and Dmitri Voronkov (19) each picked up assists.

The goal for Marchenko had to feel good after he broke his jaw in Dallas on Feb. 2 when a puck hit him on the bench.

At 4:37, Mathieu Olivier broke a 17-game goalless drought with his 11th of the season. Damon Severson (17) and Zach Aston-Reese (9) assisted.

#### **Marchenko x 2**

Marchenko scored his second of the game 1:11 into the second period for his 23rd. Adam Fantilli (18) added the helper to extend his three-game point streak (two goals, two assists).

Marchenko was the First Star of the Night. In addition to a three-point night, he had three shots and two blocked shots in 18:10.

#### **Making Just Enough Saves**

Up 4-1 in the second period following Provorov's seventh goal at 8:46, Dallas got back in the game with goals from Roope Hintz (23) and Jason Robertson (24).

Kent Johnson (20) added an assist on Provorov's goal to extend his three-game point streak. He has points in 11 of his last 12 games. Boone Jenner picked up his second assist in as many games.

Mikael Granlund (35) and Robertson (32) assisted on Hintz's goal. Granlund (36) added his second assist on Robertson's goal.

Then the Stars got a four-minute power play after a high-sticking penalty by Denton Mateychuk but Columbus was able to kill the penalty to end the second period.

The Stars scored three goals on nine shots but Elvis Merzlikins and the penalty kill came up huge.

Like any prize fight, the Jackets had to keep attacking as the Stars kept trying to counter.

James van Riemsdyk (12) scored at 2:37 of the third period to continue the early-scoring trend for the night. Sean Kuraly picked up his eighth assist.

Mavrik Bourque (9) scored with the empty net at 17:53 to cut the deficit to one at 5-4. He's on a six-game point streak (three goals, three assists). Evgenii Dadonov (17) and Logan Stankoven (19) assisted. Fantilli's 17th with the empty net the other way made it 6-4 and a final. Voronkov (20) and Marchenko (36) added the assists.

Eleven players for the Blue Jackets had a point. The Blue Jackets have scored six goals in a game this season 11 times, a franchise record.

Merzlikins made 19 saves on 23 shots. Jake Oettinger made 23 saves on 28 shots and fell to 9-1-1 in his career against Columbus. Dallas came into the game 8-1-1 in their last 10 games. The Blue Jackets' 28th win this season surpasses last years total of 27 and is their most wins since 2021-22 when they won 37.

### **Home And Home**

The Blue Jackets take on the Detroit Red Wings for a home-and-home series. First, the teams battle in Detroit on Thursday, Feb. 27, at 7 p.m. ET. Then, both teams play at Ohio Stadium on Saturday, Mar. 1 for the NHL Stadium Series showdown at 6 p.m. ET.

## The Athletic / Why each NHL team won't — but should — make a trade deadline blockbuster

By Sean McIndoe — February 27, 2025

The Athletic has live coverage of the 2025 NHL trade deadline.

The trade deadline is just over a week away. Is your team going to make a blockbuster move?

No, because this is the NHL, where all the GMs are whiny babies and making trades is too hard. There will be trades over the next few days, maybe even lots of them. But they'll be by-the-numbers stuff, a pick here for a rental there, not anything big and bold. Given the extremely middling talent expected to be available, that's all anyone can do. Your team will play it safe.

But should they? That's a different question. And for just about every team in the league, we could at least make the case that they should be aiming much higher than they inevitably will.

So that's what we'll do today. Every team gets the cursory nod toward why they won't make a blockbuster, and then a longer section on why they should. Is that fair? No, because we're putting a thumb on the scale here because trades are fun and we want all of the (many) NHL GMs who read my column to get to work. Here we go ...

### **Anaheim Ducks**

**Obviously not, because:** They're a rebuilding team that doesn't have any big-name UFA rentals, apart from maybe Brian Dumoulin, who'd get them a middling pick.

**BUT:** It's time to shoot or get off the point with Trevor Zegras. This can has been kicked down the road for over a year now, and at some point, you have to concede that the ideal offer isn't going to land on your doorstep. Deal him now and move on. Or don't, and recommit to making him part of your long-term plan — while trading John Gibson instead and turning the full-time starter's job over to the deserving Lukáš Dostál.

### **Boston Bruins**

**Obviously not, because:** They're just about completely capped out, the prospect pipeline is dry and they're not even that good, so there's no point moving mountains to make a deal that will just get them into the wild-card, if that.

**BUT:** Your captain is 36 and a pending UFA, and it's been surprisingly quiet in terms of rumors of an extension. If this is it for Brad Marchand in Boston, then pick a lane: either make a big move to make sure he gets one last run, or bite the bullet and trade him to a playoff team for exactly the sort of windfall of future assets your system desperately needs. It sure seems like the Bruins have already decided which lane to take, so now comes the hard part. Marchand says he doesn't want to go, which is nice, but it's not (completely) up to him.

### **Buffalo Sabres**

Obviously not, because: Who even cares anymore, dude?

**BUT:** Elias Pettersson is there for the taking, maybe, and this is pretty much the only chance you're ever going to get to acquire a young star who's locked into a contract for seven more years. Honestly, this should have happened already. It's not working in Buffalo, it hasn't worked in over a decade and "patience" shouldn't be in anyone's vocabulary. Go get your star.

## Calgary Flames

**Obviously not, because:** They've already made a big-ish move and they're good enough to make the playoffs as is.

**BUT:** They're going to get their doors kicked in once they get there. And sure, there's some value in just getting to the dance, especially for younger players such as Dustin Wolf. But do you really want to burn through a season just to get swept by the Oilers and then hear about it from their fans for a decade? Either load up for a 2004-style miracle run or accept reality and move some of those big contracts you say you're keeping.

## Carolina Hurricanes

**Obviously not, because:** One step ahead of you, buddy.

**BUT:** Mikko Rantanen hasn't re-signed yet, and it doesn't sound like it's close. So that leaves you with two options: Either put him back on the market or decide to go all-in on winning it all with him in what might be your only opportunity. What you absolutely can't do is treat the deadline as business as usual. This is a big-time "shoot or get off the point" choice, maybe the biggest in franchise history, and there's no going halfway.

## Chicago Blackhawks

**Obviously not, because:** They're terrible, and terrible teams sell, except they don't have anything to sell that would qualify as a blockbuster beyond maybe Seth Jones, which feels unlikely. In other words: Make a few deals around the edges and then regroup in the summer.

**BUT:** First of all, let's not shut the door on some kind of Jones deal, if only because pre-emptively ruling out creative moves is the sort of thing bad NHL teams do all the time. Beyond that, the frustration in Chicago is palpable right now, and eventually Kyle Davidson is going to have to either add some legitimate right-now talent or watch his replacement do it for him. Yes, you can point to the offseason, but why not jump in now, especially with all the teams that thought they'd be contenders now looking to dump veterans?

## Colorado Avalanche

**Obviously not, because:** They already made the biggest trade of the year, have no obvious needs and could even get a massive addition in the form of Gabriel Landeskog.

**BUT:** Yeah, this is a tough one. But if Landeskog isn't coming back, which still seems to be the most likely scenario, then they do have about \$5 million in LTIR space to work with. Use it. We know this team can win it all, but the path out of the Central will be brutal. Get that big name before the Jets or Stars beat you to it. You've certainly got the ammo to do it.

## Columbus Blue Jackets

**Obviously not, because:** They've exceeded expectations all year long and could make the playoffs, but we all know they're not winning the Cup, so stay patient and enjoy the ride.

**BUT:** First of all, who says they're not winning the Cup? Oh right, all the same people who said they would never get near the playoffs. Interesting.

But sure, they wouldn't exactly be anyone's favorites. So what? This team has won one playoff round in franchise history, and this might be the most likable version of this team we've ever seen. There's already a ton of youth in the pipeline, so why not at least consider spending a bit of that future to reward a long-suffering fan base with a memorable playoff chase?

## Dallas Stars

**Obviously not, because:** They're already good, they're capped out and their big addition will be when Tyler Seguin comes back.

**BUT:** And when is Seguin coming back? If the answer is "right around the start of the playoffs," then that means it's time to go big-game hunting. That probably means the blue line, although a top forward could help them outscore that problem. I'll just say it, Rantanen would look great in Dallas. (Hey, has he had a chance to spend any time with any Stars players lately?)

## Detroit Red Wings

**Obviously not, because:** After years of spinning their wheels, the switch to Todd McLellan seems to have finally flipped the switch. Steve Yzerman has never been a big deadline guy, so he certainly shouldn't make any panic moves now that things are actually clicking.

**BUT:** You could play it safe, the way this franchise has done for the better part of a decade. But with a playoff spot in the East there for the taking, and no guarantee that the McLellan bounce will be a long-term effect, doesn't Yzerman owe it to his exceedingly patient fan base to finally take the next step?

## Edmonton Oilers

**Obviously not, because:** They fell just short last year and already did their adding in the offseason. Now they're probably the Pacific favorites. Don't fix what isn't broken!

**BUT:** Except there is something broken. Namely, the goaltending, where Stuart Skinner just hasn't been good enough. There aren't many options for upgrading, but there are a few. Go get John Gibson and bring the Cup back to Canada.

## Florida Panthers

**Obviously not, because:** They know they can win with the group they have now, and besides, they've never really been a big deadline player.

**BUT:** Not at the deadline, no, but this is a team that's been built on big, aggressive trades. The biggest, landing Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Reinhart, came in the offseason. But they also landed key pieces such as Sam Bennett in midseason deals, and sometimes that's the best time to strike. Flags fly forever. That's flags, plural.

## Los Angeles Kings

**Obviously not, because:** Their season has already been better than most expected, and they got their deadline reinforcements early when Drew Doughty came back.

**BUT:** Sure, stay the course. By the way, the course you're staying on is "losing in the first round every single year." Normally you might figure now would be a good time to make a call on Brandt Clarke and, if a move is the answer, do it now while he still has plenty of value. But if Rob Blake decides to play it safe and keep all his assets, I'm sure the next GM will appreciate it.

## Minnesota Wild

**Obviously not, because:** This one obviously hinges on the Kirill Kaprizov injury situation, and Russo has it right: If they don't know for sure that they have his LTIR space to work with, they just can't do much.

**BUT:** If it turns out Kaprizov will miss the rest of the regular season, you have to spend that space, right? Especially if he could return in the playoffs. The Wild spent the first half earning their status as contenders; if the cap space is there, even under rotten circumstances, then you have to keep swinging.

## **Montreal Canadiens**

**Obviously not, because:** Can I interest you in a Jake Evans blockbuster? That's about all we can reasonably expect.

**BUT:** Who said we were being reasonable? The Canadiens should be looking to spend future assets to land impact players with term, even if the AAV is a little high. If that sounds familiar, it's because they already did it last summer with Patrik Laine, and that's mostly worked out fine. Granted, the price wasn't prohibitive, and maybe that's not the case in March. But it's the sort of deal the Habs should be looking at repeating, especially after a season that's told them they're not necessarily as close as they'd hoped to be.

## **Nashville Predators**

**Obviously not, because:** The season is toast. Play it out, then regroup in the offseason.

**BUT:** Why not regroup now? Or at least, get the process started. It's not like doing all the heavy lifting in the offseason worked out so great last summer, right? Granted, it's not like the Predators have a ton of players anyone would want, aside from the untouchables. So ... why not hear what's out there for some of those guys, if only to set the table for something smaller?

## **New Jersey Devils**

**Obviously not, because:** They made their big move in the summer, landing Jacob Markstrom. Now it's about tweaking.

**BUT:** I think this Greg guy might be on to something here. At the very least, the Devils are the sort of team that's both good enough and young enough that they should be willing to move future pieces for help right now, especially if there's (reasonable) term involved. It's not like the Metro doesn't look very winnable right now.

## **New York Islanders**

**Obviously not, because:** They're a borderline playoff team that isn't really a Cup contender, which means they'll tinker but mostly stay the course.

**BUT:** Would Lou Lamoriello kick off a rebuild? Probably not. Should he? Absolutely. Start with moving Brock Nelson, preferably to a team that wasn't scouting the 4 Nations. But don't feel like you have to stop there, because any offer to take a veteran salary should be seriously considered.

## **New York Rangers**

**Obviously not, because:** They tried. Nothing's worked.

**BUT:** What a mess. Last year's Presidents' Trophy champs have already made two significant deals since the season started, and they still don't look like a playoff team. At some point you stop throwing good money after bad and fold your hand.

But this is not that time. For Chris Drury, the only way out is through, and that means finding out if there's any sort of impact help available. Unlike other contenders — and yes, we're using that term extremely loosely — the Rangers should be happy to talk about sending out key pieces of the core in any deal because they don't seem to have any of that precious chemistry other teams are so protective of. If you can move an older piece, do it. Hell, even Adam Fox shouldn't be off the table. The point is we know how this ends if Drury plays it safe, and that ending won't be remotely acceptable.

## **Ottawa Senators**

**Obviously not, because:** They've got no cap room, no truly glaring needs and are on track to finally break their playoff drought. Add some cheap depth if you can, sure, but there's no need to aim bigger.

**BUT:** That "on track" is doing some work, given the Senators have spent the last month bouncing around 50 percent to 65 percent chances. Those are decent odds, but they're far from a sure thing. You want to risk the wrath of an exhausted fan base, and maybe your captain's patience, on decent? Fair enough, but hoo boy, you'd better be right.

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

**Obviously not, because:** They're a rebuilding team that's already made a major move, and now they should probably just tank the rest of the year.

**BUT:** That trade with the Flames cleared cap space, and the Flyers are now set up to be a big bidder on the top-line center they've long needed. That guy may not be out there at the deadline, but he could be. And if he is, first-time GM Danny Briere can't let some other team beat him to the punch after all but calling his shot.

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

**Obviously not, because:** They're nowhere near good enough to buy, and nobody wants the overpaid veterans they'd be tempted to sell.

**BUT:** First of all, are we sure nobody would want Erik Karlsson at 50 percent retained, with just two years left and after a 4 Nations that saw him look revitalized? No chance at all? Fine, Sidney Crosby to the Avalanche it is then.

### **San Jose Sharks**

**Obviously not, because:** Who do they really have to trade?

**BUT:** That's a fair point. Tyler Toffoli signed for the long term, and while there are pieces here that some teams might want, none of those moves will be blockbusters. So let's just say this: The Sharks are absolutely stacked for the future, so if Mike Grier wanted to be a surprise player on any major names that shake free, he could be. We all love a mystery team when the rumor machine starts churning, and the Sharks are in a great spot to be that team if nothing much ever comes of it.

### **Seattle Kraken**

**Obviously not, because:** They're not making the playoffs or winning the lottery, so ride it out and regroup in the offseason.

**BUT:** The focus around Seattle seems to be on pending UFAs such as Yanni Gourde and Brandon Tanev, which is fine. You could argue that the question is a bigger one: Is this team even close to being on the right track to winning anything? If the answer is "no," which it might very well be, then adding a few more second-round picks isn't going to be enough. Anything truly seismic probably does have to wait for the offseason, but that starts with getting real with potential trade partners.

### **St. Louis Blues**

**Obviously not, because:** They're doing that weird "retool but don't rebuild" thing, which usually means making the predictable moves but nothing more.

**BUT:** And that's the right approach ... unless the hockey gods drop a gift in your lap. In this case, that gift would be Jordan Binnington playing his best period of the season with the entire world watching, pushing him to the forefront of any goaltending trade tiers. With at least a few contenders a goalie away



from favorite status, now's the time to strike quickly and move Binnington while his value is the highest it will ever be again.

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

**Obviously not, because:** They don't have much cap room or a first in this year's draft, and have had an up-and-down season as it is.

**BUT:** Nikita Kucherov, Andrei Vasilevskiy and Jake Guentzel are in their 30s, Brayden Point is getting close, and Victor Hedman is older than all of them. No team has been better at finding creative ways to add at the deadline than Julien BriseBois' Lightning, and this is no time to get conservative. Two Cups is nice, but three or more would be better, so squeeze this stone for every drop that it has then worry about the long-term repercussions down the line.

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Obviously not, because:** The cap is tight and the roster is pretty much set, so they'll try to add some depth on the blue line and maybe down the middle but otherwise roll with what they've got.

**BUT:** How well has that plan worked out over the years? The difference is that this year, with new ownership on the way, it's almost certainly the last chance for upper management. If it goes bad and Brendan Shanahan is out, that means nobody is safe. In other words, if Brad Treliving wants to play it cautiously, that's fine. But he's going to be betting a lot of people's jobs on it, so he'd better be right.

### **Utah Hockey Club**

**Obviously not, because:** They're barely .500, so it wouldn't make sense to add anything beyond some cheap depth.

**BUT:** Hey, remember when this team was going to spend a ton of money to be the big offseason story, and that turned out to be Mikhail Sergachev and not a whole lot else? That may have been the right call, but now they find themselves with a semi-realistic path to the playoffs in year one while the Flames and Canucks flatline in front of them. You've got a ton of cap room, extra picks from the Coyotes era and this one and only chance to make a first impression.

### **Vancouver Canucks**

**Obviously not, because:** They already traded J.T. Miller, so what else do you want them to do, trade Elias Pettersson?

**BUT:** They should trade Elias Pettersson.

No, really, they should. Or at the very least, they should be having some extremely honest conversations about whether they want to be married to him and his \$93 million contract until 2032. I've been a fan of his for a while now, but this season worries me, and the 4 Nations was downright terrifying. It's possible he's just not the same guy he was once, and if that's true then the Canucks need to get out now, in what's likely to be their last chance. The offseason? That could be too late to have any kind of market. Dangle him now, let him be the deadline's biggest prize, hope some GM who thinks he's getting fired in April offers something decent, and then make a run for the getaway car and book it out of town.

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

**Obviously not, because:** Maybe they could take a year off, just to see what happens.

**BUT:** Yeah, the Golden Knights may be the one team where we don't have to do any arm-twisting, because we know how they operate: painful goodbyes in the summer, then big swings during the season. And for the most part, it works. So no convincing here — just keep doing you, Vegas.

### **Washington Capitals**

Obviously not, because: They did their shopping in the offseason, and now they're already running away with the East. And before you say that means they have to go big at the deadline, remember that their only Stanley Cup came in a year where they basically sat out.

**BUT:** The Capitals are a very good team. They're also one that's had just about everything go right this year. Those seasons don't come along very often, which is why you do whatever it takes to take advantage when they do. Caps fans know better than anyone that regular-season records don't mean a thing in the playoffs. But the players have shown management that they've earned this swing at this thing, so let's get Ovi a second Cup to go with his goals record.

### **Winnipeg Jets**

**Obviously not, because:** They may already be the league's best team.

**BUT:** That's why you go all in. Here's another: You have the best goalie in the world at the absolute top of his game, but he's about to turn 32 and there's no guarantee he can stay at this level forever. And one more: The future of the franchise might be at stake.

That's right, the whims of alphabetizing means we get to end on a team whose deadline decisions could be literally existential. If the Jets aren't in on any big name who shakes free, picks and prospects be damned, then I don't even know anymore.

## The Athletic / NHL agent poll: Best and worst owners, Connor McDavid's contract, future GMs

By Michael Russo and James Mirtle – February 27, 2025

Who are the best and toughest front offices to deal with in the NHL? Which owners are known for giving players what they need? What does the league need to do to improve?

Asking players these questions can yield some pretty good results, but there are limits to that approach. Players have relatively limited exposure to organizations outside their own. And some shy away from expressing controversial takes — even anonymously.

Want an unvarnished opinion on all things NHL? Talk to an agent. Agents often represent several players, whose employers span multiple teams and divisions. They spend their days talking to players, other agents and NHL general managers. And they're experts on the business side of hockey.

Over the past several months, The Athletic polled 19 agents, who combine to represent hundreds of NHL player contracts, on 10 key questions facing the league and its future. Agents were granted anonymity to encourage honest and candid answers.

### **1. What is the area the NHL can improve the most?**

What's holding the NHL back? Mainly marketing, agents said.

The bulk of responses centered around the league's perceived failings when it comes to selling the game and its star players, bringing in new audiences and growing hockey-related revenue (HRR). To be fair, though, all agents were polled before the recent 4 Nations Face-Off, which was a grand success for the NHL and the NHL Players' Association.

"The NHL has a compelling product, it's the most exciting live experience of any of the major pro sports," one agent said, echoing the majority of respondents. "Yet (the folks) running the league seemed content for decades to be focused more on fighting the players over using them to grow the game."

"This is where the NBA has probably done a better job than us and the NFL is hitting on all cylinders," another said. "Just using the crest and the trophy is not enough anymore."

One agent, however, noted a hurdle faced by the league in promoting player personalities: the players themselves.

"I would like to say 'selling their players better,' but the guys are so humble, it's hard to sell them," the agent said. "Other sports leagues do that better, but their personalities are bigger."

Meanwhile, more than one agent highlighted the NHL's problem in getting the games in front of viewers.

"We're missing the opportunity to expand the game to a more casual fan," one said. "We haven't quite unlocked what the key is to bringing the live experience to TV in a better way. If you watch old games from the '60s or '70s, they're kind of shot more or less the same way as now."

How the league sets up the schedule and its key events drew criticism as well. Here are some other areas in which agents feel the league could improve:

On the playoff format: "I wouldn't mind them going back (to) 1 seed vs. 8 seed instead of the divisional stuff. There's got to be incentives to having great regular seasons. Same matchups every year in the playoffs."

On expanding the playoff field: "The league continues to grow and it sounds like we're going to continue to grow beyond the 32, so I'm really surprised the owners haven't pushed this for their own selfish reasons. For certain markets, it would create hope right to the end."

On scheduling: "With the 4 Nations, Olympics, the World Cup — I think the PA, the league have failed the players, the fans, the owners instead of really understanding the wear and tear it has on the product."

On scheduling: "I'd like to see staggered start times, and I don't know how we go three or four nights with literally no games or one or two and then all of a sudden everybody plays."

On player safety: "My thing here lately is the inconsistencies with player safety. For some things that go unpunished and some things that do, I can never get a read on what they're doing or thinking. Some of these things that should be suspensions and certainly significant fines, they slip by. There's no punishment. And others that are borderline, there's heavy stuff. There needs to be a consistent standard."

On the de-centralization of the draft: "I hate (the change). It's a big thing for that city to have. I think the draft is an amazing thing."

The answers in this category offer more evidence of how far the NHL has come in the Sun Belt.

On-ice success is, of course, a big factor here, but so are other areas. Atmosphere, culture and leadership matter a lot, too.

"You have to look at Tampa with the way the owner's very good at being hands-off," one agent said. "(Owner Jeff Vinik) sat back, hired the best people and let them do their jobs."

"Tampa is awesome," echoed another. "Players want to be there. They're buying houses there and spending post-career there."

For similar reasons, the other Florida team ranks high on agents' lists.

"(The Panthers) are in sync and connected between ownership and management," an agent said. "They turned things around in short order with (GM) Billy Zito going in there. They're fair. They've developed in short order to become a destination. Those guys take less to go there because of the tax advantages down there."

In Vegas, one of the league's youngest franchises has quickly gained a reputation for winning — at all costs.

"They've been consistently competitive," an agent said. "They don't hesitate to do whatever it takes, although it may be cold-blooded at times to improve the franchise. But if you're rating them on their ability to execute on a game plan, I think from Day One they've been pretty impressive."

The Dallas Stars also received credit for on-ice success.

"From top to bottom, their scouting is outstanding, their development is outstanding. Obviously management," an agent said.

Added another: "They've just found so many players. And frankly they're really good people."

One somewhat surprising entry here might be the Jets. One agent praised the team for on-ice success in the face of attendance and business concerns.

"They are able to draft, develop very well," an agent said. "The West is a beast, but I'm impressed, for a smaller market, how they're able to operate."

The Maple Leafs, on the other hand, received credit on the business side in spite of on-ice struggles (at least in the playoffs).

"I think they've outdone the Rangers. They've outdone Boston. They've outdone Montreal," an agent said. "So I've got to give them their due as far as growing revenues in this business and running it like a corporate enterprise."

Several agents struggled to limit their answer to just one team, so 25 of the NHL's 32 teams received at least one vote.

In this category, words like "reasonable," "accessible" and "honest" carry a lot of weight.

That's the case when it comes to Tampa GM Julien Brisebois.

"Julien's pretty straightforward," one agent said. "Very accessible, easy to deal with. Player-friendly."

"They don't mess around," added another. "I like JB."

It's the case with the Wild and GM Bill Guerin, too.

"Bill Guerin's reasonable and easy to deal with and easy to have a conversation with," an agent said. "Very honest."

"Billy G's always fair," added another.

Minnesota and Guerin also received credit for staying competitive in the face of salary cap-related issues over the past several seasons.

"It's truly amazing how competitive they've been the last three years spending \$13-\$15 million less than anyone else. Imagine if they could have fielded full rosters."

People love Jim Nill in Dallas.

"Classiest, most honest guy in the league," said one agent.

Some agents noted a desire to deal with former player agents, such as Zito of the Panthers.

"I like dealing with Billy Zito. He's been on both sides of it," one said.

Canadiens GM Kent Hughes is another former agent. His partnership in Montreal with front-office veteran Jeff Gorton was a highlight for one agent.

"Kent Hughes is a very charming guy, and right into it. Jeff Gorton and him, I met with those guys, they were like two brothers fighting when I talked to them. They're funny. To actually rebuild is hard. They've done a nice job over there. They're on the right track."

Interestingly, the Ducks and Islanders — Nos. 1 and 2 in this poll's "most difficult to deal with" category, respectively — each drew a mention here.

"I know it's a crazy thing to say, but I have such trust in dealing with Lou," an agent said of Islanders GM Lou Lamoriello. "He's so honest. What he says is what he means, and vice versa."

Another agent felt similarly about the regime in Anaheim: "I like the old-school, straight-shooting guys."

As most agents quipped at first, "This would have been easy a year ago — Arizona. Poor Billy (Armstrong) had his hands tied, but the rest was unstable as hell. Not anymore in Utah."

Forced to choose a new answer, most agents picked Buffalo due to more than a decade of struggles.

The Sabres haven't made the playoffs since 2011. They haven't won a playoff series since 2007. They've been rebuilding for what seems like forever. And they're currently holding down last place in the Eastern Conference.

"Buffalo has just decades of mediocrity and is just a mess," one agent said.

Multiple agents brought up Anaheim: "The Ducks are not run well enough and are so difficult to deal with."

The Blackhawks garnered votes here for a perceived mismanagement of their rebuild so far — especially after adding Connor Bedard.

"When you got it all, you've got to run it like you do. I don't think they have a plan," one agent said. "It should be getting done right. For what they've been given, Chicago and Detroit are the biggest letdowns. They've been given the keys to the kingdom, but my gosh."

Two agents wondered about the Yzerplan in Detroit.

"They're really unstable," one said. "There's no plan, although they may say there's one."

One agent questioned the strategy in Nashville.

"They spent \$108 million on free agents this summer — older free agents, but yet they just have five first-round picks just sitting there and not developing. So what's the plan? What's the direction?"

One agent described the Ducks front office as something of a throwback.

"When I started, everybody was angry and telling you to go f--- yourself," one agent said. "So I kinda miss that. Anaheim, personality-wise, they're tough. (GM Pat Verbeek) is cranky and runs the show himself and (assistant GM Jeff Solomon) is a grinder. I like those two guys, but tough. I appreciate when they're a--holes."

"Verbeek is ridiculous. He draws lines in the sand and sticks by it irrationally," one said.

"The guy that makes Anaheim tough is Jeff Solomon," another added. "He does all their contracts. Something as simple as doing entry-level deals ... there's always something they nickel you."

A so-called old-school mentality was a theme here. So, no surprise that the New York Islanders, with a front office led by the eldest statesman of NHL GMs, fall into the category.

"They're the biggest pain in the ass to deal with," one agent said. "A lot of old-school people, and (Lou Lamoriello) has no ability to let someone else have responsibility. It's all through him, and every conversation is draining."

"I respect the Islanders, but Lou definitely holds tight," an agent added. "When he locks in his heels, he locks in his heels."

Complaints about Carolina, which tied for second here, centered on owner Tom Dundon's management style.

"It's dysfunctional how the owner micromanages everything," an agent said.

But for the most part, answers in this category came down to how tough a front office was perceived to be in negotiations.

An agent on the Golden Knights: "(GM Kelly McCrimmon) is a tough customer."

And on the Predators: "Nashville is like pulling teeth dealing with them on contracts at all levels."

Tampa's Jeff Vinik has found a winning formula — on and off the ice.

"I think he's done a wonderful job," an agent said. "He walked in there and turned the franchise around. First-class all the way. I mean, just look at what the area around the rink used to be like compared to now. He's got to be one of the best owners in sports."

Another agent put it simply and enthusiastically: "My players say he's the best owner ever."

Added another, "That guy gets it. He got it from Day One. He's done all the right things and hired the right people and stayed out of it, but also done all the things that he needed to do for the market."

With all the answers here, high rankings go to owners who have deep pockets and are perceived as willing to spend.

That's the case in Toronto, one of few NHL teams with a corporate ownership structure rather than an individual owner. Agents appreciated MLSE's willingness to spend on more than player salaries.

"They have the money to basically do whatever they want," one noted. "They treat their players great."

"There's no cost spared with the Leafs," added another. "If you need an MRI, they'll get you 35 of them."

How about the new guy? Utah's Ryan Smith isn't new to sports ownership (he has owned a majority stake in the NBA's Utah Jazz since 2020) and he's already garnered at least one solid review in his debut NHL season.

"He's new, but a \$3 hot dog, \$3 water, \$3 pop? It feels like he's part of the people. He's the new wave."

Carolina Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon ran away with this category — something that could raise some eyebrows, given the relative success of his organization.

What's clear from agents' comments is that this isn't really about any specific business decision or issues with spending (a more common sentiment the last time we did this exercise in 2022). It's more about Dundon's communication and leadership style, with several describing him as overly involved.

"I don't know how he has the time or the energy. He's the de facto GM," one agent said.

"A lot of people in our business hate it that Tom is so f---ing involved, and he is basically the manager and he has a lot of strong opinions, too, and he's not afraid to tell all of us privately those opinions."

"His GMs and assistant GMs ... have to ask him permission for anything," added another.

The idea that the owner's involvement is affecting the culture was raised several times.

"They've got some smart people there, but you just feel their culture by not even working there, just being around it. And it's not a great one."

One agent joked: "The worst part of Dundon lapping the competition here is he's probably proud of it."

Buffalo's Terry Pegula took the second spot in this category, but the comments were more focused on a perceived lack of involvement — and a lack of on-ice success.

"Buffalo has swung and missed a lot," one agent noted.

"He has not done anything," another said of Pegula. "He's in left field."

One agent said a lack of involvement was reason for the Ducks' Henry Samueli to earn votes, too.

"Ownership that isn't involved when they should be frustrates me. Like, get involved."

"Whatever the f--- he wants."

That pretty much sums up the general feeling on this one.

When Connor McDavid's current deal expires after the 2025-26 season, the question isn't whether he'll become the highest-paid hockey player of all-time; it's how much he will make.

The current CBA limits a player to 20 percent of a team's salary cap. With the cap expected to jump above \$100 million for the first time as McDavid's deal expires, could he be the league's first \$20 million man?

"McDavid should make the max. It's imperative that he does," one agent said. "He's the best player in the league. With that carries the obligation to be paid the highest amount possible, end of story."

"He's worth every penny at 20 percent," another added.

"That guy better get 20 percent of the upper limit," said another. "He's by far the best player in the game and will be for awhile and should lead the charge. Our whole league works towards a ceiling, and he should be it."

Some noted the need to balance a desire to get paid and the desire to win.

"He's got to decide if he wants to win or not," one agent said. "He has every right to ask for 20 percent and then go backwards."

"I would suggest it's going to be whatever Connor McDavid decides is most appropriate," another agent said. "I'm sure a lot of people know this, but when he did his last contract, the night before he signed it, he called and took a couple million right off the top because he felt he was taking too much money and they needed more to be able to build the team."

Another agent noted that McDavid's contract will need to compare favorably to the eight-year, \$112 million extension signed by Oilers teammate Leon Draisaitl in September, which carries an AAV of \$14 million.

"I think Connor realizes Stanley Cups are the most important thing, but obviously Leon's contract's out there, so I would say a million dollars more than Leon."

Another agent agreed on that ballpark.

"I'd say 15 percent of the cap, because you need to leave 5 percent cushion for the team to have money to spend to win," the agent said. "I think that's fair. Because if the cap goes to \$115 million, that's \$15 or \$16 million."

7a. What is the biggest issue in the next CBA negotiations?

The current collective bargaining agreement expires after the 2025-26 season, and the NHLPA and NHL appear confident a deal will be reached amicably.

"I think we are in a good place in terms of our collective bargaining relationship, in terms of our overall relationship," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said ahead of the opening game of the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Indeed, many agents are hopeful the next round of negotiations will feature less animosity than we've seen in the past.

What are the big issues likely to arise?

"I hope none," said one agent. "I hope we've ironed them out. We've had enough battles in my life — over 30-plus years as an agent. We don't need a battle."



Still, this question yielded an array of concerns on agents' minds. Most of them center around money — and exactly how it is divided between owners and players. Several agents noted, for example, that players should get a piece of expansion fees.

"If it's going to be a real 50-50 partnership, it should be in respect to everything, and I'm not just talking expansion fees," one agent said. "I'm talking more along the lines of all the insurance and everything that all comes out of the player's share. Those expenses should be 50-50 as well."

Escrow came up with nearly half the agents.

"It's always escrow," an agent said. "Escrow will be fine as long as HRR keeps going upwards. It's just making sure HRR continues to grow so everyone can share and it doesn't rear its ugly head again."

But a falling Canadian dollar had some worried about the potential hit to HRR.

"The problem we're having with the Canadian dollar that's going to be a huge issue because HRR is driven by Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver — they contribute so much. I think we're going to be into another pickle a couple of years from now."

Others had thoughts on adjustments to the salary cap.

"(There should be a) luxury tax for teams that want to spend over the cap," one said.

Another added there should be focus on keeping the cap floor at a sufficiently high level: "I feel like as the cap goes up you're going to have more and more teams having self-imposed budgets, so that's a concern."

7b. What's an under-the-radar issue that should be addressed?

This was another question that drew a wide array of responses.

The idea that tax regimes in certain markets make teams more or less desirable to players was raised more than once. Is there a better way?

"The cap should be set off teams with no state tax," one agent said, echoing a few others. "Meaning Wild or Rangers or whoever could spend their percent difference to that of Vegas. Even (the) playing field."

Not everyone agreed, though.

"That's a thing I'm sick of hearing about," an agent countered. "Nobody was talking about this 15 years ago when the Panthers were terrible. It's complete bulls---. That's not why players go there. They go there to win."

#### **Here were some other popular talking points:**

**On travel:** "Cross-conference travel and rivalries. I think they should add an extra in-division game or two in their conference rather than, say, Tampa go to Vancouver. That travel is so taxing and they don't draw well."

**On new CHL-college rules:** "I think there will be a lot of discussion about the four-year college free agency thing. Teams hate that. Agents love it where the guys can basically walk after four years. I think there's going to have to be a lot of modification based on the CHL-NCAA changes just to try to get people on some sort of level playing ground."

**On signing bonuses:** "The signing bonuses haven't even kept up with the cost of living expenses. If you're a rookie in New York and told to get an apartment, you'd rather stay in the hotel for three more months. To me, Connor Bedard making a \$95,000 signing bonus is crazy. That's the same as a college

free agent. I go to Hawks games and there's 16,000 Bedard jerseys. Maybe there should be an exception for first-round picks."

**On player safety:** "The player safety department needs to be overhauled."

**On waivers:** "That entry-level players have to wait so long before they're eligible to be put on waivers. I think a team should have two years to assess the talent of a player and develop them."

"Good players getting trapped in the minors for too long."

It's not entirely surprising that an overwhelming majority of agents are in favor of expansion.

After all, as one agent put it, "More jobs. Agents would always be for that."

"I want the NHL to go to 40 teams. Forty-five teams," another added. "The more the merrier. If we get to 50, I'd be thrilled."

Some did note, however, that the league should be careful not to dilute the talent pool.

"I don't think there's enough good players to expand," one said.

Most disagreed, arguing more opportunity will result in more stars.

As for where the NHL should go next?

"Going to strong TV markets is the low-hanging fruit and most important element, so Houston makes the most sense," one agent said.

"Add teams in the U.S. Avoid the Canadian dollar," another said. "Add Houston and Atlanta, and then realign. Why's Utah in the Central?"

**Here's what agents had to say on the options:**

**On Phoenix:** "Phoenix can work with the right owner and building. Utah, you see how much difference ownership makes right off the hop. It changed almost immediately."

**On Houston:** "Fourth-biggest market in the U.S., and it never gets mentioned. It's a no-brainer."

**On Quebec City:** "I have no idea why they're not in the league if Winnipeg is."

**On Quebec City negatives:** "I don't want another Canadian city; we need to generate revenue."

**On Atlanta:** "Bad ownership plagued them last time. Horrible ownership actually, so find the right group and location, it could work."

**On Atlanta negatives:** "F--- Atlanta. We've tried that a million times. There's no way."

**On Atlanta negatives:** "I'll believe this Atlanta stuff when we see it. We've been there twice. They seem to think it'll work a third time. We'll see."

**On Kansas City:** An agent pointed to the NFL's Chiefs as an example. "Maybe they can get that market."

**On Toronto:** "I think it's the most insane thing in the world that there's not two teams in Toronto. It's crazy."

Several agents described the current NHL schedule as a "grind." Adding more games is unpopular.

More teams having a shot at the postseason, though? There might be something there.

"I would probably be in favor of some play-in games," one agent said. "I think it's worked well in baseball and it's been good for TV and would be good overall for HRR."

Another added, "It's so hard to make the playoffs, so if we can take the teams that were like one regulation loss away from making it, I think that'd be fun."

Still, there were several who emphasized that the schedule is too long as it is.

"There's too many games. If anything, I would reduce the number of games," one of eight agents who responded "no" said.

A main target for reducing the workload: the preseason exhibition schedule.

"The exhibition situation has been so poorly run," an agent said. "It's so imbalanced. There's really no rhyme or reason to it. Most teams, at most, really have one spot you can fight for in training camp if everybody's healthy."

One agent said the season needs to start and end earlier.

"Yes (to adding regular season games), but no more than two games and as long as the exhibition season gets cut down to balance it out. And the Stanley Cup needs to be awarded no later than the first week in June. Why not start the season Sept. 15?"

Seventeen GMs-in-waiting garnered votes as the one to watch — including two agents who selected themselves.

Penguins assistant GM Jason Spezza received the most mentions, though.

"From the very beginning, even when he was in his last year as a player, he had a thirst for knowing everything he could learn," one agent said. "He's very, very thorough in everything he does and is learning every part of the organization. Kyle (Dubas) gave him access to everything in Toronto and now Pittsburgh. Jason approached it like he did everything else — just 100 percent."

Another member of Dubas's front office was praised by one agent: Vukie Mpofu, the Penguins' director of hockey operations and legal affairs.

"One of the sharpest, committed and genuinely good young people. He's a star," the agent said.

In the two-vote club, Leafs AGM Brandon Pridham and Panthers AGM Brett Peterson stood out.

"I think he does a lot of work and doesn't get a lot of credit," an agent said of Pridham. "He's quiet, but I think he's done yeoman's work there for a lot of years and doesn't necessarily get on people's radar."

Another said of Peterson: "Former agent. He's very smooth, very smart. He's in tight with USA Hockey, well schooled by Billy Zito. He's an impressive guy."

Speaking of former agents, Canucks AGM Émilie Castonguay — the first Canadian woman ever certified as an agent — received a vote.

"She's a strong presence. Smart and has the right edge," an agent said. "Not only does she have a strong legal education, she has navigated the game from all sides, player-agenting and managing. She's a skilled communicator and strategic thinker."

## ESPN / NHL contender kryptonite: Biggest flaws for nine top teams

**By Rachel Doerrie – February 27, 2025**

The NHL trade deadline is less than two weeks away on March 7, and there is plenty of adding to be done for the contenders. As is always the case, not every playoff team is a Stanley Cup "contender." We focus here on nine of the top teams based on the standings, with sustainable underlying numbers and key strengths heading into the playoffs.

A few principles that many GMs abide by when building a contender for the playoffs: You can never have enough defensemen, confidence in goaltending and forwards with tough skill -- the kind of skill that allows players to be difference-makers when games get tighter. Management and coaches want players they can trust, and often those players are the physical, defensively responsible types. Shoring up those areas often becomes a more pressing priority than acquiring depth scoring, or a high-end player.

With those parameters in mind, here's a look at the current weaknesses of the top five teams in the Western Conference and four from the Eastern Conference -- and what they might do ahead of the deadline to alleviate them.

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

**Current record: 33-20-4, second in Metro**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in second round**

Carolina is certainly in a conundrum after pulling off one of the most high-profile trades in recent memory. Mikko Rantanen has not fit like a glove in Carolina. To be fair, he played a few games and went off to the 4 Nations Face-Off, so he hasn't had enough time to settle into his new surroundings. During that stretch, Carolina has played two home games, meaning Rantanen has spent five days at most in Carolina. That isn't enough time to decide whether he wants to sign an extension for \$100 million-plus.

Of course, the Hurricanes need to decide if they want to keep him. They have historically struggled to score at critical times in the playoffs, and Rantanen is a proven playoff scorer. They need him for that exact reason. Should the Canes move Rantanen before the deadline, bringing in Brock Nelson (a pending unrestricted free agent), Brad Marchand (UFA) or Rickard Rakell -- who has three years remaining at \$5 million AAV -- might help bridge the gap.

### **Colorado Avalanche**

**Current record: 33-24-2, fourth in Central**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in second round**

After acquiring Mackenzie Blackwood, trading Rantanen to Carolina and having Martin Necas fit perfectly alongside Nathan MacKinnon, the Avs are in good shape. The biggest area of need was addressed with the acquisition of Blackwood in goal, but Colorado has a few questions that need answers.

There has been a Valeri Nichushkin-sized hole in the lineup, as a player who was critical to their Stanley Cup victory was out since Dec. 31 before Wednesday's return. Josh Manson is out of the lineup, leaving the Avs very thin below the top defense pairing. They could use an upgrade on their bottom pair, regardless of Manson's health.

The main hole in their roster for which there is no internal fix is second-line center. Casey Mittelstadt has not worked out, and the Avalanche need a lot more from their 2C if they are going to get out of gauntlet that is the Central Division. The Avs are getting consistently outmatched in that spot, and while Nichushkin's return will help, they need a significant upgrade at the center position. Adding the Schenn brothers address both the 2C (Brayden) and defensive depth (Luke) needs. Brock Nelson and Ryan O'Reilly (if he'd be willing to return to Colorado) would be excellent fits for what the Avalanche need on the second line.

## **Dallas Stars**

**Current record: 37-18-2, second in Central**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in conference finals**

Miro Heiskanen's status for the rest of the regular season is the biggest piece of the puzzle. He is one of the best defensemen in the NHL, and when he and Thomas Harley are playing, Dallas might have two of the most underrated defensemen in the league.

The Stars need help on the right side of the D because Matt Dumba, Ilya Lyubushkin and Cody Ceci do not inspire confidence. The need for a 4/5 defenseman is obvious, and the Stars have money to make it happen. Given the significant need on the right side, Rasmus Ristolainen seems like a fair fit. The right-handed defenseman has performed admirably in Philadelphia, and brings a physical element. A top four with Heiskanen, Harley, Esa Lindell and Ristolainen would be formidable in the postseason.

There is the Seth Jones conversation as well. Jones, a Texas native, has indicated he'd like to be moved to a contender. Dallas is just that, and with its deep pool of prospects, could put together a good deal to get Chicago to retain money on Jones' contract. He plays the right side, kills penalties and can provide strong minutes when he isn't the top shutdown option. There is reason to believe Jones would welcome a move to Dallas -- the question is whether Dallas has the appetite to pull it off.

## **Edmonton Oilers**

**Current record: 34-19-4, second in Pacific**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in Stanley Cup Final**

The Oilers are in an interesting position because it's the last year of Leon Draisaitl's bargain contract, and only two playoff runs remain with Connor McDavid in his current deal. The Oilers are a roller coaster, with their top performances looking like future Cup winners and their bad performances looking like a 12th-place team.

Their "B" game needs to come a long way before April, and part of having a good B game is consistent goaltending. Can you get the saves when you don't have your A game? Right now, the answer is no. The Oilers also need some scoring depth because predictably, Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins are not repeating their production from last season.

John Gibson is the most obvious name in the goaltending conversation, and it makes sense. When Stuart Skinner is on his game, he's a guy with whom you can win a Cup. When he's not, he's unplayable. Gibson is a better stopgap than Calvin Pickard, and he's used to being under siege on any given night in Anaheim. He has stolen wins for the Ducks and acquiring him might allow the Oilers to platoon their goaltenders in the playoffs. But Gibson's injury might complicate things.

Up front, if Carolina decides to move Rantanen and are willing to bring his cap number down even further via salary retention, the Oilers should explore it. Beyond that possibility, Ryan Donato and Brock

Boeser make sense as pending UFAs, and Rickard Rakell presents a longer-term fit if they can make the money work.

### **Florida Panthers**

**Current record: 34-21-3, second in Atlantic**

**Last year's playoffs: Won the Stanley Cup**

Matthew Tkachuk is the biggest wild card, because there is no filling that kind of hole at the deadline. If the Panthers do have his cap hit to work with at the deadline (if he goes on LTIR), they might go after a big-name player. The Panthers need to strengthen their left side, regardless of Tkachuk's health, because it's thin after Carter Verhaeghe. Ryan Donato, Trent Frederic and Brandon Tanev all make sense for Florida, as does Scott Laughton, who can play a depth center role.

Florida also needs to add depth on its blue line, which drops off after the top three. A physical penalty killer to take the weight off the top pair would really strengthen Florida's defense. Luke Schenn, Rasmus Ristolainen, Connor Murphy and David Savard could be candidates for that role.

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Current record: 35-20-2, first in Atlantic**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in first round**

Yes, we're all aware the Leafs shouldn't necessarily be here until they prove their worth in the playoffs. But their standings position, underlying numbers, goaltending and play style have people believing this season could be different.

The priority is no secret: They must add a third-line center. The Leafs have been rumored to be interested in reuniting Brayden and Luke Schenn -- Brayden for 3C and Luke for defensive depth. Scott Laughton and Nick Bjugstad are centers in whom the Leafs are known to have interest, especially given their physical play, two-way ability and general ornery presence. Yanni Gourde has been linked to the Leafs, but an injury has complicated the situation.

A few wingers of note for the Leafs: Brandon Tanev, Luke Kunin and Ryan Donato fill the role of bottom-six winger in the eyes of coach Craig Berube. Each of them has a few key traits: two-way player, physical, tough to play against and penalty killer. All of them are capable of chipping in offensively, which gives the Leafs an added dimension to the third line.

There is a strong belief that Toronto is very interested in uniting the Tanev brothers or the Schenn brothers. The top end of the Leafs' lineup is set in stone for this playoff run, so adding depth and value to the bottom end could be critical to their success.

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

**Current record: 34-18-6, first in Pacific**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in first round**

Vegas doesn't have a glaring need to fill externally. But the Knights have William Karlsson- and Shea Theodore-sized holes in their lineup. Both of those players, particularly Theodore, are vital to success for Vegas. Both are expected to play again this season, but Theodore might not be back until the playoffs. If the Golden Knights have assurances that he won't be healthy until the playoffs, they are expected to use the LTIR space to acquire some other players.

If that is the case, finding someone to slot in the top six on the wing would be a major boost. Brandon Saad and Mark Stone flank Brett Howden on one of the best third lines in the NHL. Karlsson will replace Raphael Lavoie on the second line, but an upgrade of Victor Olofsson for Jack Eichel's right side is something the Knights might consider.

Outside of that, depth defensemen to manage injuries throughout the stretch run and playoffs makes sense. Vegas has a Cup-contending lineup when its roster is healthy. They need to ensure the stopgaps aren't as big a drop-off if they're to get through the West.

### **Washington Capitals**

**Current record: 38-11-8, first in Metro**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in first round**

The Capitals have been the surprise of the season, and they should be engraving coach Spencer Carbery's name on the Jack Adams Award now, if they haven't already.

There is one glaring hole in the Capitals' lineup that needs to be addressed: third-line center. Washington loses matchups in that role, and having a player who is reliable in a shutdown role, can kill penalties and provide some offense would be a major addition. If Washington has the appetite for a longer-term solution, Dylan Cozens fits the timeline of its younger players, and the Caps have the prospects to acquire him in trade from Buffalo.

Washington is expected to add NCAA star Ryan Leonard to the lineup at the conclusion of his college season, but he's a winger who probably will slot in on the third line. Jake Evans and Nick Bjugstad are natural fits for the 3C role, and would bring a size and scoring flair to the third line while capably driving play.

### **Winnipeg Jets**

**Current record: 41-14-3, first in Central**

**Last year's playoffs: Lost in first round**

This might be the best Jets team since the return to Winnipeg. On the back of excellent seasons for Connor Hellebuyck, Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Josh Morrissey, the Jets are poised to go on a run.

That is, if Hellebuyck doesn't start seeing April ghosts as has happened in past playoffs. Then again, that's not an issue for which the Jets can prepare; he's their guy and deserves to be their guy for a long time.

Winnipeg does need a 4/5 defenseman, and if they could get Brock Nelson from the Islanders, he would be an upgrade over Vladislav Namestnikov for the playoff run.

The pairing of Dylan Samberg and Neal Pionk has worked for the Jets this season, but Pionk has struggled in the playoffs. Acquiring a physical presence -- who moves pucks well under pressure and can kill penalties -- would be a difference maker. Pionk and Dylan DeMelo have negative penalty kill value, which isn't good if you're a contender. Ristolainen and Ivan Provorov are capable second-pairing defensemen with positive penalty kill value that would bolster Winnipeg's chances.

## Sportsnet.ca / Real Kyper's Trade Board 4.0: Why the Blues are open for business

**By Nick Kypreos – February 27, 2025**

Is there anything new an NHL team can learn with less than 10 days until the trade deadline?

That's what many teams are asking themselves.

Teams have their trade wish lists all set and ready to go, but what isn't set yet is how high of a price they are willing to pay. Believe it or not, there is still plenty of time for decisions to be made.

Take the St. Louis Blues for example. I have five Blues players on this week's list and they will be listening on even more as GM Doug Armstrong considers how to take a new approach with this team before handing over the reins to Alexander Steen in 2026.

We should be clear about something, however: this isn't a fire sale for the Blues. They will look to move one or two of the big pieces they are listening to offers on in an effort to change the look and feel of the roster for next season. The only untouchable player is believed to be Robert Thomas.

Armstrong is thinking about taking a similar approach as the Washington Capitals, who did many teams a favour by showing you don't have to go into a five-year rebuild if things aren't going according to plan. The Capitals are a perfect example of a team that re-shaped its roster, and turned around from a non-playoff team in decline two years ago to become the Eastern Conference leading contender we see today.

If you make the right decisions, you can quickly turn around your fortunes.

So the Blues are one of the most interesting teams to watch as we approach the trade deadline, but are far from the only organization with tough decisions to make.

The Edmonton Oilers, for instance, allowed 17 goals in their first three games back from the 4 Nations Face-Off. If you include the loss to Colorado before the break, that's 22 goals against in four games.

With Florida and Carolina still ahead of Edmonton on their current road trip, what would another bad loss or two do for president Jeff Jackson and GM Stan Bowman and how confident they are in their goaltending? Jordan Binnington appears on this list and the Oilers will have to think about him.

Staying in the West, I hear the Kings are desperate to shake things up to give themselves the best shot of getting out of the first round of the playoffs and not suffer another defeat against Edmonton.

Quinton Byfield isn't a name we've heard come up in trade rumours until this week, but suddenly he could be in play. Perhaps he is the player Los Angeles can move to change their look for an opening playoff round.

Meantime, there is a lot of talk that Carolina's eight-year offer worth more than \$100 million with deferred salary to Mikko Rantanen might not get it done and could quickly put him back on the market.

Teams are ready to pounce on Rantanen. In the West, the Vegas Golden Knights and Dallas Stars — who have yet to replace Tyler Seguin — are ones to watch on that front, if the Hurricanes decide they have to move the star winger.

In the East, the Florida Panthers could be a team in the running for Rantanen if Matthew Tkachuk's long-term groin injury potentially ends his regular season. And don't rule out the Toronto Maple Leafs either, as they could acquire Rantanen as a bit of security in case Mitch Marner decides to head to free agency



on July 1. They could seamlessly replace Marner with Rantanen on a line with Auston Matthews and could probably get an extension done.

Finally, there is a big and physical player who intrigues me: Buffalo's Alex Tuch. The six-foot-four winger will be appealing to any Stanley Cup contender. Once projected as a possible captain of the Sabres, he no longer appears destined to be part of their long-term plans.

Some teams, such as Anaheim, Boston and the NY Islanders are teetering on the cut line and are using the last few days to consider their options. But many others on either side of the buyers or sellers line are ready to trade.

Let the games begin.

Nine games into Mikko Rantanen's time with the Hurricanes and the team is still looking for answers from him. If Carolina doesn't get the response they want to their nine-figure contract offer that our Elliotte Friedman reported on Hockey Night in Canada this past weekend, look for trade talks with other clubs to kick into high gear.

The offer, north of \$100 million over eight years, is a lot of money to turn down if he doesn't sign, though it's possible Rantanen could push for a higher AAV as a free agent on the open market. However, his term would be capped at seven years as a UFA instead of the eight Carolina can presently offer.

The Hurricanes are now on the clock, nine days away from the trade deadline. If Rantanen doesn't take this offer, it's unlikely Carolina would increase it significantly. So, rather than lose him for nothing as a UFA on July 1, as they did with Jake Guentzel last season, Carolina could trade Rantanen. It's believed all contending teams will kick tires on Rantanen considering his cap hit could drop down to \$2.3 million if the Hurricanes retain another 50 per cent, after Chicago already did from the original trade.

When Don Sweeney spoke to the media on Sunday, he didn't sound like a GM who was going to be actively adding much at the deadline. Sweeney talked about being cautious and maybe planting a seed for the draft -- things selling teams talk about doing this time of year.

The Bruins are running out of time to put themselves in any better position in the playoff race before the trade deadline, and long-term injuries to Hampus Lindholm and Charlie McAvoy make the road ahead an even tougher journey. As a result, players like Trent Frederic and Brandon Carlo could be had.

And we still wonder what the conclusion will be on winger Brad Marchand. It sounds like negotiations hit a snag a while ago and are at a stalemate today.

"We've been in negotiations with Brad and communicating with him through the year," Sweeney said. "We'll have to have a conversation now that the 4 Nations is over, sit down with Brad and his representatives and have a clearer path in the next two weeks as to what his final outcome will be."

Whenever Marchand is asked about his future, he's adamant that he wants to finish his career as a Bruin. Boston would like the same thing, but is holding firm on not wanting to pay Marchand too much, or give him too much term as he turns 37 years old in May.

At this stage, it remains more likely than not that the Bruins will keep Marchand past the trade deadline, even if a contract extension is not done by then, and take their chances that an agreement will eventually be completed. That probably means Marchand will eventually need to accept Boston's price and term, one or two years instead of his preferred three or four.

As long as he's unsigned rumours will persist and teams will ask up until March 7, but Marchand is the team captain and means a great deal to the organization and city. That likely means that, when all is said and done, he'll still be a Bruin.

Another player who's been on my radar since first appearing on my 2.0 trade board in January, Seth Jones confirmed last week that he and the Blackhawks have discussed the possibility of finding a trade. Jones is 30 years old and with five more years remaining on his eight-year contract, it isn't clear that his career trajectory is in line with what the Blackhawks are doing.

"I would like to give myself a chance to win in my career," Jones said to Ben Pope of the Chicago Sun-Times. "I know that the money is not an easy thing to move, and that's what we're figuring out."

The money will be the trickiest part of this, with Jones making \$9.5 million against the cap. At the same time, teams pursuing Jones will weigh his age and the fact the NHL's salary cap is projected to be at \$113.5 million in three years when Jones will still have four years remaining on his deal.

Will the Blackhawks explore using their final salary retention slot on Jones, before the other two slots open again next season? They might have to consider that if they are going to squeeze every ounce of value out of the player in a trade.

At the 4 Nations Face-Off Sam Bennett stood up and solidified himself again as a big-game player and someone you can count on to show up in the playoffs. So then, you might ask, why is this member of the defending Stanley Cup champions on a list of potential trade candidates?

You can't replace what Bennett brings to the table, and now that Matthew Tkachuk is out long-term the Panthers are less likely to move No. 9. He should make at least \$8 million on an extension, a big number, while Florida also has to figure out what it's going to do with another important pending UFA, Aaron Ekblad.

Bennett started this season off very hot, then cooled off considerably and didn't score a goal for a month-and-a-half. But just before the 4 Nations break Bennett got rolling again, scoring five times in 10 games. He had a goal and an assists Tuesday night this week.

Erik Karlsson had a notably strong performance at the 4 Nations Face-Off, which is stoking the fires of his trade candidacy. Making \$10 million against the cap for another two seasons beyond this one, it won't be too punishing if the Penguins retain a little money, especially if it increases his trade value. Besides, the retained money on Jeff Petry and Reilly Smith come off the books after this season.

Karlsson is still an offensive dynamo, sixth among all blueliners in even strength points this season, ahead of the likes of Evan Bouchard, John Carlson and Victor Hedman.

The Ottawa Senators remain an intriguing potential suitor, while Dallas has also popped up as a potential destination. There will be others, too.

After the J.T. Miller trade, things aren't getting much better in Vancouver with Elias Pettersson. He has played seven games since the Miller trade and has just three assists to show for it (all primary helpers) while being shut out in goals. In fact, he hasn't recorded more than one shot on goal in a game since Jan. 31 against Dallas.

Pettersson's performance at the 4 Nations Face-Off left a lot to be desired as well, and he was held off the score sheet completely.

So the situation is this: Pettersson signed the richest contract in Canucks history, an eight-year, \$92.8 million extension just before last season's trade deadline. The Canucks exerted some pressure to get that deal done or else consider moving the player, but at that time Pettersson was one of the top scorers in the NHL, 11th in the league with 75 points in 63 games.

No one could have predicted what's happened to the team and player since.

Now Pettersson is currently a depressed asset, with just 35 points in 51 games, pacing towards a career-low 50-point season. The Canucks are left having to seriously consider moving Pettersson before a full no-movement clause kicks in for the second season of his contract in July. If things don't vastly improve by the end of the season, their best course of action is to revisit his trade status at the NHL Draft in June when they invite the whole NHL market back to the trade table.

Under normal circumstances I'd have him off my pre-deadline list, but I'm putting Pettersson back on because Jim Rutherford runs this team. Enough said.

The Canucks appreciate the player and would like to take another crack at signing Brock Boeser to a new contract, but money and term remain a sticking point. An ask believed to be in the \$8 million range seems achievable, but it might not come with the term Boeser is comfortable with. If Boeser wants to maximize his earning potential and get six or seven years then he'll have to go to UFA, so the threat of him being traded still hangs in the balance, even if the Canucks are in a playoff spot on March 7. They're in a tight race for the second wild card, sitting one point out Wednesday morning, and management isn't confident enough to hold their own rental.

The Canucks have been struggling to put pucks in the net, averaging 2.10 per game since January 1 (last in the league), and the goal scoring winger hasn't pulled his weight on this front. Boeser has just four goals in his past 21 games, a 16-goal pace for someone who notched 40 last season.

The lineup is out the door and around the corner of teams calling on Dylan Cozens' availability, which gives the Sabres options. Just two years removed from being a 31-goal scorer, Cozens is facing having back-to-back years of declining production but it's not going to be so easy for Buffalo to move on from this player. After all, Cozens is still just 24 years old and is in just the second season of a seven-year contract.

Other teams will see the potential Cozens has, and that's why Buffalo locked him in for so long. Making \$7.1 million against the cap through 2029-30, if Cozens even comes close to recapturing what he showed in 2022-23 he will have an extremely valuable contract when the upper limit expands to wildly new highs.

The Sabres must tread carefully. They've extended a rebuild before when they traded Jack Eichel and have seen several players moved who went on to have much more success elsewhere. Making the same mistake again with such a young player at an important position is a risk the Sabres would be taking by trading Cozens.

So, Buffalo would need to hit a homerun here, while rival GMs might be looking to take advantage of an underperforming player and scoop him up for a relative bargain. But the Sabres are staring down the reality of missing the playoffs for a 14th straight season, which requires some reaction from the front office.

Bowen Byram will be an RFA after the season, so the Sabres aren't forced into a trading situation with him yet. And, in fact, he has two years of RFA eligibility remaining before Byram would become a UFA in 2027.

This is another player for the Sabres to tread carefully with.

One year after acquiring Byram for Casey Mittelstadt, the dynamic defenceman is tied with John Carlson for 13th in even strength points at the position, right behind teammates Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power. Byram's seven even strength goals lead all Sabres defencemen.

Even if he were to double his salary on an extension and end up at \$8 million, it still wouldn't be a bad number for a productive blueliner and would come in under both Dahlin and Power.

The second-leading goal scorer on the Sabres, Alex Tuch is a local kid and not a rental dump. Making \$4.75 million for this year and next, the 28-year-old is valued and productive -- he has as many even strength goals this season as Sam Reinhart, and one more than Nathan MacKinnon.

So why would the Sabres entertain moving such a player when one of the problems here is surrounding the young core with experience and secondary production?

It's because Buffalo has to consider how to move forward with a different look if they're going to miss the playoffs for a 14th year in a row and, if they're going to make a positive acquisition that brings in something to get excited about, they'll have to move out something good to get it.

Tuch would be an attractive addition to any team looking for scoring help on the wings and someone with size. Tuch stands 6-foot-4, 220 pounds, is second among all Sabres in blocked shots, and kills penalties. If Tuch moves, look for it to be part of an exciting hockey trade.

Two Sabres defencemen appear on this list, but it's unlikely that GM Kevyn Adams would move both of them by the deadline. In Samuelsson, Buffalo has a defenceman signed at a \$4.285 million rate through 2029-30 -- an extremely valuable deal, given he's only 24, leads Sabres blueliners in penalty killing minutes, and is charged with plenty of defensive zone matchups.

The feeling remains that if the Sabres find a home for Samuelsson that returns them a good price, they could turn around and re-sign Byram. Or, if Byram fetches an intriguing return, Adams could instead go that route and keep Samuelsson for the top four.

There was a lot of doubt that Jordan Binnington was the best choice to tend Team Canada's net at the 4 Nations Face-Off, with Logan Thompson sitting at home. But Binnington put together a great performance, with standout efforts in the most important parts of the games he played. Binnington's play against the USA in overtime of the final was the reason why Canada came out with the win, and garnered him some MVP consideration. He all but locked up the country's starting job when the Olympics roll around next winter.

His 4 Nations tournament has once again opened the eyes of many teams that he's a 'big game guy'.

On my last trade board, I had listed several Blues players because GM Doug Armstrong was not happy that his team was again chasing the playoffs from distance so he started looking to shake things up. Binnington did not make the list earlier this month, but there's enough talk to put him on this one with the Blues still four points out of the wild card and with three teams to climb over.

The goalie market is a difficult one to figure out. Thompson himself was traded for a couple of third-round picks in the summer. Colorado went and upgraded its net during the season and acquired MacKenzie Blackwood for Alexandar Georgiev, Nikolai Kovalenko, plus second- and fifth-round picks. John Gibson has been out there for years, including this one again, but injuries keep biting the Ducks' netminder.

The Blues would surely demand more for Binnington, a Stanley Cup winner making \$6 million for another two seasons and with an 18-team no-trade list attached to his contract. Binnington would be the focus of the goalie market, and we shouldn't underestimate the interest level Edmonton, Carolina and Detroit have in him. The Oilers may be one of the teams on his no-trade list, but the Edmonton market and playing with Connor McDavid could re-create the excitement that shot into him at the 4 Nations, so he may waive for them in the end.

Buchnevich signed a six-year extension with the Blues that doesn't kick in until next season, but as Armstrong looks to adjust his team on the fly the 29-year-old left winger remains one of the most interesting players the GM could move.

The 6-foot-1, 200-pound forward has scored 30, 26 and 27 goals in the past three seasons, but just 12 through 57 games in 2024-25.

Even though his production is not where it usually is, the fact Buchnevich has a contract perhaps makes him more valuable in trade than if he were a rental. His new deal will jump to an \$8 million AAV, which is around what Boeser is asking from the Canucks. Buchnevich currently has a 12-team no-trade list, which becomes a full no-trade clause beginning next season.

Jordan Kyrrou does not have any trade protection attached to his contract for now, but a full no-trade clause is introduced in July and will run through the next five years of his deal, which comes with an \$8.125 million AAV.

Kyrrou is the most shocking Blue on this list because he re-signed ahead of a breakout 37-goal season and was seen as a core part of where the Blues were going. He and Robert Thomas still make more than any other Blue, but as the team struggles to take a leap forward, Armstrong is having to consider changing over the core group.

Kyrrou is still highly valued and on track to finish with his third straight 30-goal season and a similar point total to what he finished with in 2023-24. He'll be 27 in May and in the prime years of his career.

Brayden Schenn appeared on my previous list earlier this month, but I noted at the time that there wasn't an indication Armstrong would shock his fan base by trading his captain yet. The fact is those calls are picking up in frequency and the offers may end up being too much for him to turn down.

The idea of acquiring both Schenn brothers (Luke from Nashville) is appealing to more than one team, but Brayden would be the prize of the package. Still productive with 12 goals and 34 points. If you can't get Sam Bennett, or if the Panthers take their centre off the board, Schenn is one of the next best players who can have the sort of playoff impact Bennett does.

Schenn has three more years left on a contract paying \$6.5 million against the cap and has a no-trade clause. But as the Blues' playoff hopes fade, Schenn may be open to a change of scenery, especially if it means joining up with his brother.

Just a few short weeks ago, Colton Parayko was deemed untouchable by GM Doug Armstrong. Since then, he's hung up the sign that he's 'open for business' and that includes the potential of trading his top defenceman if the deal is right.

The Blues have been looking into trading one of their top paid defencemen for some time, but four of them have no-trade clauses and Armstrong has been trying to build up a winner. As it becomes more clear that this group isn't going to have its breakthrough, however, the possibility of trading one of them gets stronger as we approach the deadline.

On my last list I included Justin Faulk as the Blues defenceman who could go, and his name is still on the table. But Parayko's value has never been higher than it is right now coming off his performance at the 4 Nations Face-Off and Armstrong will move him if a contending NHL team offers a homerun return he envisions.

Parayko leads the Blues in shorthanded ice time per game, plus he leads all St. Louis defencemen in hits, goals and points. The 13 goals Parayko has put in this season is a career high. His stature, 6-foot-6, 228 pounds, is also appealing.

When the Los Angeles Kings consider how to approach the trade deadline, they have to still look up at Edmonton and Vegas in the standings and wonder how they could get in position to knock off either, or

both, of them. The Kings have been knocked out three years in a row by Edmonton, finding a quicker way to elimination each time.

So the Kings have to be asking themselves, what can we add that would give us a better shot at beating these teams?

Quinton Byfield is a name to watch here for a few reasons. The first is that, if Los Angeles is to make a big move to counter Vegas and Edmonton, they'll have to give up a significant young piece to a seller. Byfield is exactly that, a 22-year-old and the second overall pick from the 2020 draft.

Byfield took a step and finished with 20 goals and 55 points last season, which had some wondering if he could crack Team Canada's 4 Nations roster with another elevation of his game in 2024-25. That hasn't happened yet and, in fact, Byfield is pacing to fall short of last year's offensive totals.

That has left the Los Angeles organization wondering how high Byfield's ceiling truly is and if the team would be better off focusing on the here and now by flipping Byfield for a more seasoned roster upgrade. Of course, Monday's four-assist game in a win over Vegas will give the Kings' decision makers pause.

There are rumblings that the Buffalo Sabres and Los Angeles Kings have held talks and both sides may be interested in a package that includes top assets coming from Buffalo.

Chris Kreider appeared on my first trade board in December when it got out that the Rangers were looking to trade him and Jacob Trouba. After the captain was traded to Anaheim, however, things died down in New York for a time. They've gone 12-5-3 since early December and have pulled themselves back into the race, just two points out of a wild card spot. But there are still cracks in a roster that gives up more high danger chances against at 5-on-5 than every Eastern Conference team except Montreal.

Back from the 4 Nations Face-Off where he scored one goal in two games, Kreider returns to my trade list because it doesn't sound like GM Chris Drury is done making tweaks to his team. Kreider has not had one of his stronger seasons, scoring 17 times versus four assists. The long-time Ranger has two seasons remaining on a contract worth \$6.5 million against the cap and he has some control over his situation, with a 15-team no-trade list. Though, we should point out, Jacob Trouba was leveraged to waive his no-trade to Anaheim.

Kreider was a late scratch with an upper-body injury for Sunday's win over the Penguins and missed Tuesday's game against the Islanders as well.

A pending UFA, 27-year-old Ryan Lindgren falls into the rental category and if the Rangers wanted to retain some of his \$4.5 million AAV to make a deal work better for a buyer, they haven't yet used any of their three retention slots.

Without a contract in place, the Rangers have to ask themselves if Lindgren is part of this core moving forward or not. And if the answer is no, it's time to consider trading him to the highest bidder instead of moving forth with an own rental for a playoff push.

Lindgren has stepped up into a more prominent PK role since Trouba was traded away and he's second on the team in blocked shots. The more pressing defence contract for the Rangers to wrestle with is K'Andre Miller, a pending RFA who is not having his strongest season after trending up the past few years. Still two years away from being UFA eligible himself, Miller could assume some of Lindgren's cap dollars if re-signed.

Losers of four straight, including two post-4 Nations losses at home to Dallas and the Rangers, the Islanders are seven points out of a wild card spot and just barely hanging on to hope. Given Lou Lamoriello's trend of being loyal to this group, he may take any trade decisions down to the wire.

And there are many of those decisions to make. Kyle Palmieri is a goal scoring winger on an expiring contract. Noah Dobson, a 25-year-old defender, is a possible trade candidate before he becomes an RFA this summer. Nelson might be the player who moves the needle most for contenders, however, a middle-six centre who has scored 37, 36 and 34 goals over the past three seasons and has 17 goals in 57 games this season.

Nelson was held without a point and was a minus-3 at the 4 Nations Face-Off, then returned with an assist in Sunday's loss.

The Colorado Avalanche have been looking for a productive second line centre ever since Nazem Kadri walked as a free agent in 2022. Kadri was a key piece of Colorado's Stanley Cup win that season and the team has missed his presence ever since.

That's why the Avs went out and acquired Casey Mittelstadt from Buffalo last season and gave up the costly return of Bowen Byram to get him. Mittelstadt scored nine points in 11 playoff games for Colorado last spring and showed the potential he could be the missing piece. This season, however, hasn't been so neat.

Mittelstadt is a middle-six NHL forward, but miscast as a follow up pivot behind Nathan MacKinnon. Mittelstadt has won just 41.7 per cent of his faceoffs, has just two goals since New Year's Eve, and even made way for Mikko Rantanen at the position for a brief time before he was traded. When you compare Colorado's second line centre to other contenders in the West, Mittelstadt is not stacking up this season.

So his name is out there again as the Avalanche continue their search for Kadri's replacement three years on.

At one point in time, and not all that long ago, Trevor Zegras was seen as a face of the Ducks franchise and a central part of the plan forward. Now, after injuries that held him to 31 games last season and interrupted this one mid-way through, Zegras is struggling to find the production and consistency he had when he was a young star on the rise.

Zegras posted a career-high 65 points in his 21-year-old season but has now been contributing at about a 41-point pace two years running. Since returning from his latest injury (knee) on Jan. 21 he has six points in 10 games.

There is no chance the Ducks will be able to get the same return in trade on Zegras today than if they had decided to move him two years ago, but GM Pat Verbeek has been looking into finding the player a new home all season. Zegras will turn just 24 years old on March 20 and has another season on a contract paying \$5.75 million against the cap, after which he'll be an RFA. Hard to imagine that being a big raise.

This is a tough sell low situation if the Ducks proceed, but it's becoming more apparent that Zegras just doesn't fit the mold of how Verbeek wants his team to play.

We talked about the goalie market earlier in this piece, and John Gibson is a great example of how it can be tough to move someone at this position. Gibson has been a mainstay in rumours and trade lists for years, but as his numbers struggled to keep up to his peak seasons, it was hard to suss out how much of that was him and how much was due to the rebuilding team in front of him.

Gibson again has been out there this season, and the rise of young Lukas Dostal in Anaheim's crease appeared to make it even more likely that the 31-year-old would finally move. His numbers have even started to bounce back -- Gibson has a .916 save percentage this season, his best mark since 2018-19, which is all the more impressive when you consider save percentages are down everywhere in the league.

And then the main concern with Gibson appeared again this past weekend. The injury bug bit Gibson, forcing him out of Saturday's game against Boston after the second period. Ducks coach Greg Cronin said Gibson will be fine, but the episode was a reminder to any potential buyer that Gibson has sometimes struggled to stay healthy through the years.

On Monday, the Ducks acquired some organizational depth at the position by bringing in netminder Ville Husso from Detroit for future considerations.

Gibson makes \$6.4 million against the cap for another two seasons and has a 10-team no-trade list.

A pending UFA making \$2 million against the cap, Ryan Donato has 19 goals and 39 points in 56 games and is Chicago's leader in even strength goals and points.

Donato can be a feisty player, third on the Blackhawks in hits, but he wins just over 45 per cent of his faceoffs. He's a sell high type of player for the Blackhawks who will earn a raise off a career season, but his shooting percentage of 15 is by far a career-high as well.

If the Sharks can get the right return for Mario Ferraro they'll be open to moving the player, but this is still not an urgent trade situation. That's because Ferraro has another season remaining on his contract, makes just \$3.25 million against the cap, and is a valued left shot penalty killer playing top pair minutes at even strength.

Ferraro is also one of the more physical Sharks defencemen and blocks a good amount of shots, too. Still just 26 years old, he's on the fringe of still being young enough that he could be a useful piece for the Sharks when they come out of this rebuild, so it's still possible the team keeps him and looks at re-signing him before he hits the open market in a year.

Three wins in a row and the Flyers are clinging to hope that they can stay in the playoff race. But take a step back and you'll see they still need to step over five teams just to get to the first available wild card spot and they may be better selling off some pieces.

Rasmus Ristolainen is big, kills penalties, shoots right, throws his weight around and is having a bit of a bounce back season -- all ingredients appealing to playoff teams. He has an additional season remaining on his contract too, which also comes with its own value. But the Flyers might see that and figure he's worth holding on to yet.

The Utah Hockey Club will eventually become buyers, but this might be one trade deadline too early for that. There are a few interesting trade possibilities on this roster, from Matias Maccelli, to Alexander Kerfoot and Nick Bjugstad. But, if he moves, Lawson Crouse might be the most valuable of all.

Crouse has two more seasons after this remaining on his contract and makes just \$4.3 million against the cap, a bargain for what he can bring to the table. While his scoring is down to just nine goals and 13 points this season, he has shown he can get over 20 goals and 40 points and he's a big, physical forward, leading all Utah players in hits.

At 6-foot-4, 214 pounds, Crouse is a controllable asset and intriguing depth player whose stats this season might not jump off the page at you, but who you'll notice when the games get tighter in the playoffs.



## Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet's 2025 NHL Draft Rankings: February Edition

**By Sam Cosentino – February 27, 2025**

We're into the stretch drive for the 2025 NHL Draft. Scouts continue to scour the earth for under-reported gems, while GMs are busy readying for the NHL trade deadline on March 7, which will have draft ramifications. On deadline day, I will be hosting a panel along with Jason Bukala and two special guests during Sportsnet's broadcast.

Meantime, the draft eligible prospects continue to balance team aspirations with their personal goals while jockeying for position amongst their peers.

This draft class has experienced ebbs and flows like few others in recent times. James Hagens went into the season as the projected first overall pick, but as the season has progressed other names have entered the fold such as Michael Misa, Porter Martone, and Matthew Schaeffer. For a month or so, it looked like a four-horse race for the top spot. Here we are now in February, and the same names are still there, although Schaefer, despite being injured, has separated himself from the rest of the group.

I see a few factors why he's separated from the pack. First, he plays a premium position; it's extremely difficult to find a top-pairing defenceman. Schaefer projects to have the ability to take games over singlehandedly from the back end. Next, his size. At 6-foot-2, 183 pounds, he's already a big kid, but with plenty of room to pack weight and muscle on to his frame. If recent times are an indicator, teams have shifted back to drafting for size, especially on defence. Schaefer's age also factors into this equation. With a September 5, 2007 birthday Schaefer is one of the youngest players in this class. The cutoff date is September 15, meaning that Schaefer will turn 18 just before his first NHL camp begins. That suggests there's more developmental time that much of the draft class has already experienced. Some of this time, of course, has been mitigated by injury.

Lastly, this young man has experienced tragedy and adversity like few others his age. He lost his mother to cancer after moving away from home to continue chasing his dream in Erie. While there, he also lost his billet mom which, for CHL players, is akin to losing a third parent.

He's also endured two injury setbacks from this season, so he's had to overcome plenty. A bout of mono kept him out of the lineup for the start of the regular season, while most of the country witnessed his clavicle injury while representing Canada at the world juniors. Schaefer's ability to navigate adversity is a trait that isn't overlooked by NHL scouts.

To this point, Schaefer has played just 17 games for Erie, two CHL/USA Hockey prospects games, a couple of world junior exhibition games and a little more than one official world junior game. Through his brief career, Schaefer has won four gold medals and captained three of those championship teams. There is some hope that if Erie can hang around in the playoffs, an April return is possible.

Amazingly, he's done enough in the limited number of games he has played to indicate he is the top prospect of this class.

Looking at the three other players in the conversation, it's hard to knock any one of them. As a freshman at Boston College, Hagens is up just over a point per game, and who can forget his top-notched performance helping the Americans to win gold at the world juniors?

Martone exhibits the size and style of game that every NHL GM covets. He is big, plays big and produces big numbers. Having been a member of Canada's world junior team as an underaged player is also a feather in his cap.

Misa has lived up to the expectations of an exceptional player. He's now the captain of the resurgent Saginaw Spirit, he's won a Memorial Cup and he's also now completed the vaunted 50 goals in 50 games milestone. No doubt, he's been inspired by the world juniors snub.

It's not just those four players who make the top end of this draft class interesting. There are a few players who may threaten that group and some others who are definitely top-10 material. While we may not see the high-end depth through the later stages of round one, it will be fun to watch how the first half of this draft shakes out.

Caleb Desnoyers is mature beyond his years. Anton Frondell has found his game. And how do teams feel about the health of Brandon's Roger McQueen? The beauty of this class is that outside of Schaefer, there will be a lot of options for the rest of the teams picking in the first half of the first round. That list includes a few defencemen in Jackson Smith, Logan Hensler and Radim Mrtka, who has fully transitioned to North America.

Keep in mind, there's still plenty of high-leverage hockey to be played including respective league playoffs and the U18 World Championship in Texas, starting the third week of April.

**In the meantime, here are my latest draft rankings for the 2025 class:**

**No. 1: Matthew Schaefer, D, 6-foot-2, 183 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)**

Despite limited game action this season, he has shown enough against high-level competition to have separated himself from the rest of the group.

**No. 2: Michael Misa, C, 6-foot-1, 184 pounds, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)**

His goal scoring element has taken centre stage as he has entered the OHL history books with a goal per game pace through 54 games. Off the rush, on the power play, one-on-one, he can burn defenders in a multitude of ways.

**No. 3: James Hagens, C, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Boston College (NCAA)**

Continues to produce point per game numbers as a freshman at a premium position. Proving he doesn't always have to play with Gabriel Perreault and Ryan Leonard to be successful.

**No. 4: Porter Martone, RW, 6-foot-3, 208 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)**

After a mid-January dip in production, he's back to producing big numbers with points in 11 of his past 12 games as of writing.

**No. 5: Caleb Desnoyers, C, 6-foot-2, 178 pounds, Moncton Wildcats (QMJHL)**

Relentless compete, high-end skill, and plenty of physical growth potential make Desnoyers a mainstay within the top five.

**No. 6: Anton Frondell, C, 6-foot-1, 198 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)**

He's making a lot of noise in the scouting community for his recent play both internationally, but in particular in the Allsvenskan.

**No. 7: Radim Mrtka, D, 6-foot-6, 207 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)**

Hasn't taken long to adjust to North America. He's a horse who can eat minutes, lean on opponents and provide a bomb of a shot from the point.

**No. 8: Carter Bear, LW, 6-feet, 179 pounds, Everett Silvertips (WHL)**

Moves well all over the ice to create disturbances and turnovers. Once with the puck, Bear can create for teammates or finish with elite touch.

**No. 9: Jake O'Brien, C, 6-foot-2, 172 pounds, Brantford Bulldogs (OHL)**

Cerebral player who can control the pace of play with delays, quick hands and deception.

**No. 10: Victor Eklund, LW, 5-foot-11, 161 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)**

Always in the fight, Eklund is not deterred as a smaller competitor. He anticipates the play well and is aware of where everyone on the ice is at any given moment.

**No. 11: Jackson Smith, D, 6-foot-3, 195 pounds, Tri-City Americans (WHL)**

An intriguing prospect in that he is a legit two-way defender with a ton of swagger. He can transport the puck and support the rush.

**No. 12: Ivan Ryabkin, C, 5-foot-11, 201 pounds, Muskegon Lumberjacks (USHL)**

Can impact the game on multiple fronts. A more consistent effort on the defensive side would put him in a top 10 position.

**No. 13: Brady Martin, C, 6-feet, 178 pounds, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds (OHL)**

Knows what he is and is at his best when playing a simple, straight-line game with a dose of heaviness.

**No. 14: Justin Carboneau, RW, 6-foot-1, 191 pounds, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL)**

Can manipulate the puck to deceive defenders. Has super slick hands that work well beating defenders one-on-one or at the net-front.

**No. 15: Logan Hensler, D, 6-foot-2, 192 pounds, Wisconsin (NCAA)**

A Steady Eddie type of defenceman who keeps the opposition to the outside with good quick feet, body and stick positioning. Should be able to add layers of offence with age and experience.

**No. 16: Jack Nesbitt, C, 6-foot-4, 185 pounds, Windsor Spitfires (OHL)**

Is an all-situations player on a team loaded with talent. Elite hand-eye coordination makes him an excellent net-front option and efficient on draws.

**No. 17: Cameron Reid, D, 6-feet, 193 pounds, Kitchener Rangers (OHL)**

Continues to make strides towards the top half of this draft class. His elite skating ability makes him a threat on the power play, but also allows him to maintain tight gaps to disrupt plays in neutral ice.

**No. 18: Malcolm Spence, LW, 6-foot-1, 203 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)**

Not the most dynamic player in this draft class, but his game is still highly effective. He competes in all three zones and has plenty of skill to produce at least mid-level offence at the next level.

**No. 19: Ben Kindel, C, 5-foot-10, 176 pounds, Calgary Hitmen (WHL)**

A buzz saw type of player who is quick to get on loose pucks and quicker to make things happen with it. He reads the play well and is aware of available options.

**No. 20: Roger McQueen, C, 6-foot-5, 197 pounds, Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL)**

Based on the latest update, McQueen's return from injury is imminent and he's back on the ice in a non-contact jersey. If healthy, there is a top 10 player in him.

**No. 21: Lynden Lakovic, LW, 6-foot-4, 190 pounds, Moose Jaw Warriors (WHL)**

He's at the high-end of this draft class in the 3S categories: skating, size and skill. Using all of those elements to become more of an inside presence will help his cause.

**No. 22: Braeden Cootes, C, 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)**

He's no fun to play against. He's constantly in the opposition's grill creating havoc all over the ice. He exhibits the ability to check, which has become a buzzword in NHL circles lately.

**No. 23: Sascha Boumedienne, D, 6-foot-1, 175 pounds, Boston University (NCAA)**

Trying to work through the defencemen in this draft class is a challenging task. Boumedienne doesn't overwhelm you with any one part of his game, yet all the parts together project him to be a mid-pairing defenceman at the next level, with ample seasoning.

**No. 24: Jakob Ihs-Wozniak, RW, 6-foot-2, 184 pounds, Lulea (J20)**

Since mid-January he's torn up the J20 circuit with 20 points over his past 12 games. He needs skilled players around him to increase his effectiveness.

**No. 25: William Moore, C, 6-foot-2, 175 pounds, USNTDP**

He can make the game look easy when he's moving his feet and playing with pace. Moore can play an in-tight game with quick hands and slick moves.

**No. 26: Cole Reschny, C, 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, Victoria Royals (WHL)**

He's been in and out of this space and his game is like a few others in this class in that he gets after it, but also has a finesse to his game to make others around him better.

**No. 27: Kashawn Aitcheson, D, 6-foot-2, 196 pounds, Barrie Colts (OHL)**

An infectious player with a boatload of personality who can play a rough and tumble game with some offensive upside.

**No. 28: Joshua Ravensbergen, G, 6-foot-5, 190 pounds, Prince George Cougars (WHL)**

A number of goalies have started to emerge in this class, but the track record, size and raw nature of this prospect speaks to a high ceiling selection.

**No. 29: Cole McKinney, C, 6-feet, 200 pounds, USNTDP**

The top point producer for the US program has shown steady improvement all season long. The expectation is that he's at his best now and is set to make a forward push at the U18 worlds.

**No. 30: Cameron Schmidt, RW, 5-foot-7, 161 pounds, Vancouver Giants (WHL)**

There are a number of smaller, skilled forwards in the upper end of this draft class. Why not take a chance on an elite goal-scorer who can get up ice in a hurry?

**No. 31: Jack Murtagh, LW, 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, USNTDP**

The Boston University commit has the enviable combination of will and skill. He's never afraid to get the puck to the net.

**No. 32: Bill Zonnon, C, 6-foot-2, 185 pounds, Rouyn-Noranda Huskies (QMJHL)**

He left home in Montreal at a young age to attend prep school in the United States, not only to hasten his hockey development, but to be forced into learning English.