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**January 15, 2026**

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## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness coached three players' dads

**By Brian Hedger – January 14, 2026**

New Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness, 70, paused his retirement to rejoin the NHL as Dean Evason's replacement in Columbus. His debut was an exciting 5-3 home win over the Calgary Flames on Jan. 13 that saw Bowness coach the son of another player he had coached many years earlier.

Cole Sillinger's father, Mike Sillinger, played for Bowness in 2003-04 with the former Phoenix Coyotes. Bowness was promoted from assistant to interim head coach of the Coyotes that season.

Bowness has also coached the fathers of injured Blue Jackets forwards Mason Marchment (Bryan Marchment) and Miles Wood (Randy Wood).

Bowness won't have a chance to look for similarities in Marchment and Wood to their fathers until they're healthy enough to return, but Sillinger has already shown the new coach a genetic connection to his dad in his style of play.

"Hockey sense," Bowness said. "I talked to Cole today about that. I said, 'You play like your father.' Mike had good hockey sense."

Bowness has also coached two other father-son combinations: Jevgeni/Vladislav Namestnikov and Robert/Kristian Reichel.

Bowness will coach his second game for the Blue Jackets on Jan. 15 at Nationwide Arena against the Vancouver Canucks, when they'll try to win a third straight game.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Rick Bowness wins Columbus Blue Jackets coaching debut: Takeaways

By Brian Hedger – January 14, 2026

Rick Bowness came out of retirement to become the new head coach of the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Bowness was hired just 24 hours before coaching the Blue Jackets to a 5-3 victory over the Calgary Flames.

Captain Boone Jenner earned his first career "Gordie Howe hat trick" with a goal, an assist, and a fight.

Players Kent Johnson and Dante Fabbro received significantly more ice time under Bowness and contributed to the win.

Rick Bowness was on a boat.

Cruising the Florida Intracoastal Waterway in Fort Lauderdale with his wife, Judy, the 70-year-old former NHL coach was the picture of retirement. Then, he received a text message Jan. 12 from Don Waddell, a longtime acquaintance and president/general manager of the Blue Jackets.

Bowness told his wife that Waddell probably wanted to talk before agreeing to acquire a former player of his in a trade, but the Jackets' GM instead offered a job. Head coach. He smiled and glanced at Judy.

"Wait until you hear this one," he said.

Waddell, speaking at a mid-day press conference on Jan. 13 at Nationwide Arena, relayed that Bowness needed just a few seconds to reply, "I'm in ... let me just run it by my wife."

And that's how one of the NHL's most experienced coaches went from happily retired, cruising through life on a boat, to answering questions in Columbus in the span of 24 hours, hair tousled and voice raspy after coaching the Blue Jackets to a 5-3 victory over the Calgary Flames.

"I love it," Bowness said.

Even losing his voice?

"Yeah," he said. "I talk a lot."

Blue Jackets players confirmed that part, saying it was different having the head coach in their ears all game, often individually, but that's the part of the Bowness wanted to experience again. After getting through his and his wife's unspecified health issues, which prompted his retirement with the Winnipeg Jets in 2024, Bowness is back in the NHL coaching realm.

"I love it," he said. "I just love it. It's why I came back. It's what I missed the most. When I was out a year-and-a-half, the thing I missed most was the interaction with the players, and I love that part of coaching ... working with the players and talking with the players and helping them get better. The second part is that I love being behind the bench."

So, here we go.

A season that began with Dean Evason coaching the Blue Jackets continues without him in that role, replaced by a guy with similar energy who says a lot of the same things about successful hockey teams. Will this coaching jolt get the Blue Jackets back on track? Is there enough runway left to rejoin the playoff race? What's in store for Bowness and the Blue Jackets beyond this season?

Time will answer those questions.

In the meantime, there are 35 games left for the Blue Jackets (20-19-7) to close a six-point gap in the race for the second wild card in the NHL's Eastern Conference, a.k.a. the last playoff ticket. There are also seven teams to leapfrog, but Bowness' first Blue Jackets win has already moved them past the New York Rangers, the new last-place team in the conference and Metropolitan Division.

Boone Jenner isn't an enforcer, per se, but he's the type of power forward who can do a little bit of everything, including fight.

So, it was no surprise that a slash to the back of his legs following a whistle led to a donnybrook between the Jackets' captain and Flames defenseman/irritant Rasmus Andersson. The surprise landed after the game, when Jenner revealed that he had just registered his first Gordie Howe hat trick (a goal, assist and fight in the same game).

Following the fight, Jenner added the goal with 1:34 left to play for a 4-3 lead, and the assist came on Charlie Coyle's insurance tally into an empty net.

"That's the Boone Jenner I remember coaching against for a long time," Bowness said. "Boone ... I love watching him play. I'm glad I'm coaching him, because he's a hard guy to play against because he doesn't quit."

The four goals that preceded Coyle's empty-netter were scored with wrist shots past undersized Flames goalie Dustin Wolf.

Wolf, like Blue Jackets goalie Jet Greaves, is listed at 6 feet tall and might actually measure a tick under that mark. That means there's space to shoot above his shoulders when he drops into a butterfly position on his knees.

Coyle had the first two-goal game of his Blue Jackets tenure; and he Jenner, Dante Fabbro and Zach Werenski all beat Wolf under the crossbar and over his glove and blocker. Coyle also screened Wolf for goals by Fabbro from the blue line and Werenski from the top of the left circle.

Coach Rick Bowness unleashes Columbus' Kent Johnson, Dante Fabbro

Fabbro, who'd been locked in Evason's proverbial doghouse, reunited with Werenski on the Blue Jackets' top defensive pairing with Denton Mateychuk (upper-body injury) and Damon Severson (illness) out. Fabbro skated 21:02, gave the Jackets a 1-0 lead early in the game and finished with one of his best performances.

Kent Johnson did the same on the top forward line, logging a season-high 20:55 on 22 shifts. Johnson, who also struggled to exit Evason's doghouse, forced a late turnover by Flames defenseman MacKenzie Weegar that led to Jenner's winning goal.

"He deserved those minutes," Bowness said. "He played hard. He's not the biggest guy, but he competed. ... and he'll keep those minutes as long as he keeps playing like that."

## The Columbus Dispatch / Boone Jenner leads Blue Jackets to win in Rick Bowness' debut

**By Brian Hedger – January 14, 2026**

Boone Jenner made sure the start of Rick Bowness' tenure running the Blue Jackets' bench didn't start with the kind of signature meltdown that led to Dean Evason's exit Jan. 12 in a mid-season coaching switch that caught the NHL by surprise.

Jenner scored with 1:34 left in the third period Jan. 13 at Nationwide Arena to lift the Blue Jackets to a 5-3 victory over the Calgary Flames, giving the veteran Bowness an exciting win to mark his Columbus debut despite going 0-for-3 on penalty kills and letting two more leads vanish.

Jenner added an assist and fought Flames defenseman Rasmus Andersson to notch the first Gordie Howe hat trick of his career with a goal, assist and fighting major to lead the Jackets, who lost leads of 2-0 in the second period and 3-2 earlier in the third, all on Calgary power-play goals.

Dante Fabbro, Charlie Coyle and Zach Werenski scored the other goals for the Blue Jackets (20-19-7), including Coyle potting his second of the night into an empty net with 2.6 seconds left to give Jet Greaves (29 saves) the goaltending win.

Morgan Frost, Andersson and Mikael Backlund scored goals for the Flames (19-23-4), who started Dustin Wolf (38 saves). Calgary lost for the fifth time in its past six games, while Columbus won its second straight after downing the Utah Mammoth 3-2 in OT to conclude a 1-3-0 road trip Jan. 11 in Salt Lake City to conclude Evason's time as the Blue Jackets' coach.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Adam Fantilli "Excited for Future" After Coaching Change

By Mark Scheig – January 14, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets weren't meeting expectations under previous head coach Dean Evason. GM Don Waddell took swift action by hiring Rick Bowness on for the rest of the season.

One of the key factors that many believe went into the coaching change was the performance of the Blue Jackets' young stars. With their production down compared to what was expected, it signaled that Evason may not have been getting the best out of them.

Under Bowness, it's a fresh start for everybody including the Blue Jackets' young stars. Kent Johnson and Cole Sillinger didn't score goals on Tuesday night against the Calgary Flames. But each were noticeable in their own right.

Johnson played over 20 minutes while leading all Blue Jackets' forwards in time on ice. Postgame Tuesday, Bowness said that Johnson's ice time "was deserved."

One other forward eclipsed 20 minutes for the Blue Jackets on Tuesday. Adam Fantilli had five shots on goal and was over 64% at the faceoff dot against the Flames. Bowness after practice on Wednesday called Fantilli's line "good."

Fantilli has just one goal, the overtime winner against Anaheim back on Dec 16, in his last 19 games. It's not due to a lack of chances. He has 55 shots on goal in that span. That trend isn't going to last forever.

### **Another New Coach**

Fantilli has played in 177 NHL games after Tuesday night scoring 55 goals and 110 points in that time. Not even 200 games into his NHL career, he's already on his fourth head coach.

Fantilli made his debut in October 2023 the fall after he was drafted third overall. His first NHL head coach? It was technically Mike Babcock. Then it became Pascal Vincent.

Waddell elected to move on from Vincent in the summer of 2024. In came Evason. Fantilli played for Evason both for the Blue Jackets and at the last Men's World Championships for Team Canada. Perhaps there would be some consistency developing.

That got put to a screeching halt with the move to Bowness. The Hockey Writers spoke to Fantilli on Wednesday afternoon after practice to get his reaction to the coaching change.

"At first, I was surprised," Fantilli said. "Any time there's a mid-season coaching change, it's a bit of a shock. But we're looking forward. Obviously, we haven't been performing to the level that we expect from ourselves and our fans expect from us. Management made a change and we're excited for the future."

When there is a coaching change, other changes usually follow. New systems have to be learned. Players also have to adapt to the way their new coaches operate. Fantilli acknowledged that's been a lot to take in during his first couple of seasons.

“Every coach has different things that they want, different things they expect from you,” Fantilli said. “You’re learning to know new people, to interact with different people and different leadership styles. It’s been a lot over the last two and a half years but it’s exciting. I’ve loved every bit of it. Hasn’t been too much change in the locker room with the guys and I’ve gotten to know everybody really well. That’s been a great constant for me.”

“But behind the bench, yeah, there’s been a lot of changes and it’s been different. Every coach has different philosophies but I’m still having a good time.”

### **Early Bowness Impressions**

Fantilli referenced an excitement to having a new voice running the bench. For just one game on Tuesday night even from the press box, the vibe felt different. Did he see it that way too?

“I think it kind of feels like you’re back in training camp or like a first day of school type feeling,” Fantilli said. “Got a new coach. Everyone wants to play their best, not that everyone doesn’t want to play their best all the time, but maybe give a little extra. The system, a couple tweaks that he made made us play a little more aggressive and maybe that’s why I looked a little bit more free out there.”

Bowness said he’s gone around to all of the players individually and will continue to do so in an effort to get to know everyone. He was seen at the morning skate Tuesday interacting with guys including Fantilli.

What has been Fantilli’s early impressions of Bowness?

“He’s very experienced. He’s got 2,700 games in the NHL (and) has been in the league for 50 years. From what I can tell, he’s a really good man. (He) cares a lot about the people in the locker room and I love how vocal he is on the bench too. It’s someone that brings energy and I appreciate it a lot.”

Bowness said during his introductory press conference that he’ll bring structure and attention to detail to the Blue Jackets. For someone like Fantilli who continues to get better away from the puck, it’s another reason why he’s excited to see what Bowness can do for him defensively.

“Just maybe some positional stuff on where I’m just arriving at in the D-zone, where I’m staying at getting into guys earlier. There’s always more you can do, I feel like, to make it harder for teams to get to your net and to enter your zone. That’s a guy who has a lot of experience in that area so I’m excited to learn from him.”

“Personally, I think I’ve made a lot of great strides there (defensively.) I know my plus/minus might not be showing that but I’ve been on the ice for a ton of empty net goals. My faceoff percentage has gone up like 9%. It’s all the stuff I’ve been working on.”

Fantilli might not have the goal totals he wants at this point. But he is doing a lot of other things well and now has an exciting opportunity to learn from a coach that has seen it all over his long successful NHL career.

If Tuesday night is any indication of how the ice time is going to go, expect to see a lot more of the young stars in key situations. It’s easy to see why Fantilli is excited for the future thanks to this coaching change.

## The Hockey Writers / 3 Trade Deadline Targets for the Columbus Blue Jackets

By Wesley Minke – January 13, 2026

After firing head coach Dean Evason on Monday, the Columbus Blue Jackets have made it clear they are not interested in a rebuild. With the trade deadline approaching, Columbus is in a tricky position. Either they will spend money and assets to make a push despite sitting last in the Metropolitan Division, or they will become sellers and try to recoup assets ahead of free agency and the draft.

Here are three players that the Blue Jackets could target. One is an easy flip, one might be a long shot at a hometown discount, and one fills a need the team must address.

### **Was the Blue Jackets' firing of Dean Evason surprising?**

#### **Joonas Korpisalo**

The Blue Jackets and Joonas Korpisalo could both benefit from a reunion at this point. Columbus could swap goaltenders with the Boston Bruins, Korpisalo for Elvis Merzlikins and some picks with salary cap relief for the Bruins as well.

Boston traded for Korpisalo when they swapped goaltenders with the Ottawa Senators two summers ago, but the move really hasn't worked out. With Jeremy Swayman as the clear-cut starter and Korpisalo struggling, they may be willing to flip him for another backup and see if a reset works for everyone.

The Blue Jackets would also love a new face to back up Jet Greaves. Without Greaves in the crease this season, it has been tough for the Blue Jackets to stay in games. Korpisalo has not been the same player since he left Columbus, but he excelled there and would be arriving at a discount.

Korpisalo spent the first seven seasons of his career with the Blue Jackets before he was traded to the LA Kings in his eighth campaign. He has yet to post a season with a save percentage above .900 since he left, but a return to the team that gave him his start might help.

If Korpisalo can revitalize his career with the Blue Jackets, it would take a lot of pressure off Greaves and give him a chance to rest and be in peak form for a final stretch run.

#### **Kiefer Sherwood**

Kiefer Sherwood has been a standout performer on a struggling Vancouver Canucks team that has quickly fallen out of playoff contention. Sherwood will likely be dealt before the trade deadline, and coming home to Columbus, where he was born and raised, might be the perfect landing spot.

He has shown his ability to score this season, with 17 goals in 44 games, after scoring 43 goals in his first 265 games before this season. He could be a nice fit on the second or third line if the Blue Jackets decide to move on from Boone Jenner.

His high shooting percentage might be a bit on the lucky side, but right now, all Columbus should be thinking about is that he's scoring. He would also bring a bit of physicality that the team is missing. He is second in the NHL in hits with 210, and he plays the type of two-way game that the Blue Jackets are desperately missing late in games when they are protecting a lead.

Sherwood is also good on the power play, with six power-play goals this season, and would be an additional presence for the opposition to worry about outside of Kirill Marchenko.

### **Justin Faulk**

The biggest hole on the roster is on defense. Acquiring Justin Faulk would add depth to the blue line that would allow some players to play fewer minutes late in games. Faulk is a big-bodied veteran and a solid puck-moving defenseman who can impact the game both ways.

He has 11 goals through 46 games this season, and with the St. Louis Blues near the bottom of the Western Conference, they might be willing to part with him for some prospects and/or picks to retool for next season.

Faulk knows how to play within a system, which is what new Blue Jackets head coach Rick Bowness will demand from his players. He could also be a leader in a room that is struggling to find leadership.

If Jenner is shipped off to a contender, Faulk would have a steadying effect on the Blue Jackets' blue line with offensive upside. His contract is not too expensive for Columbus to take on, and he would fill a big need.

Regardless of how the Blue Jackets' next few games play out, management will have some major decisions ahead. If they decide to make a major push, these three players would be huge additions to a roster that really wants to turn their season around.

## ESPN / U.S. men's hockey thinking 'gold or bust' to end 46-year wait

ESPN News Services – January 15, 2026

Burned in Zach Werenski's memory is the first U.S. practice at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February.

"You look around and see the skill," Werenski said. "I was like, 'This is fast.' It's wave after wave, player after player."

He and his countrymen fell short at that tournament, which was designed to be an appetizer of sorts for the return of NHL players to the Olympics. Over the summer, when the country's best gathered again for an orientation camp ahead of next month's Games in Milan, USA Hockey general manager Bill Guerin told them that nothing but gold would suffice.

"I love it," winger Matt Boldy said. "You shouldn't be doing anything unless you're trying to be the best at it."

The U.S. has not won a so-called "best-on-best" international competition at the adult level in three decades dating to the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. It has not won men's gold at the Olympics since the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" team.

The overflowing talent and winning pedigree of the players going to Italy make Guerin's expectation as realistic as ever.

"Everyone knows we have the team," top defenseman Quinn Hughes said. "I don't think anyone would be surprised if we won, so I think that that should be our goal. It's kind of gold or bust, just like it is for Canada."

Canada is the gold-medal favorite four weeks before both it and the U.S. open group play Feb. 12, listed at +130 at DraftKings Sportsbook. The Americans are listed second at +200.

The U.S. lost to Canada in the 4 Nations final, in the semifinals at the 2014 Olympics in Sochi and in the gold-medal game at the 2010 Vancouver Games. The neighbor to the north is set to have four of the best players in the world on its roster with Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and two-time Olympic champion Sidney Crosby together for the first time.

American talent adds up too, from a stacked blue line led by Hughes, Werenski, Charlie McAvoy and Jacob Slavin and a forward corps featuring Jack Eichel, Auston Matthews and brothers Matthew and Brady Tkachuk to elite goaltenders Connor Hellebuyck and Jake Oettinger. NHL standouts Dylan Larkin and Jack Hughes are expected to be depth contributors.

"It's not just having a good team on paper," Guerin said. "It's actually getting it done."

The U.S. has gotten it done at other levels for many years, winning four of the past eight world junior championships (for players under age 20) and a handful of under-18 titles over the past decade-plus.

"It starts at that age," defenseman Noah Hanifin said. "The younger generation, you start to see it kind of develop and grow, and I think winning those tournaments is really showing how many strides USA Hockey has taken."

Strides in coaching have also helped. Two-time Stanley Cup-winning coach Mike Sullivan is back in charge after being behind the bench at 4 Nations, when his team showed flashes of dominance and came one goal away from winning it all.

Werenski, who last spring helped the U.S. win the world championship for the first time since 1933, knows it would be foolish to overlook teams like Czechia, Switzerland, Slovakia and Germany. But he agrees with Guerin that the strong showing in games against Canada, Sweden and Finland in a meaningful tournament will carry over to Milan.

"They're great measuring sticks on where you're at, and I just really like the way we played and how hard we played and how close we were," Werenski said. "That tournament gave us a lot of confidence still in terms of knowing that we can beat anyone on any given night."

The U.S. plays against Latvia on Feb. 12, Denmark on Feb. 14 and Germany on Feb. 15 before, barring upsets, moving into the single-elimination quarterfinals Feb. 18. There is not much time to acclimate after they arrive Feb. 8.

Guerin brought back the vast majority of players from 4 Nations because he liked the chemistry of the group, which did not materialize just over a couple of weeks in Montreal and Boston. This generation of Americans grew up playing together, many at the U.S. National Team Development Program and at tournaments worldwide along the way.

"In a weird way, everyone's just buddies," Werenski said. "We're all just good friends and good hockey players, and I think that's what really helps us."

Friendship by itself won't overcome a multigoal deficit or crack a hot goalie threatening medal contenders at the Olympics. But players think setting the standard at gold is the right place to start because the U.S. has been building for this for a long time.

"The biggest thing we need to do now is just get over the hump of winning at the biggest stage," Jack Hughes said. "Winning the Olympics, that'd be massive and completely put us over the hump. And that's the expectation."

## [The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Teams interested in Dougie Hamilton, Gerard Gallant's return, coaching hot seat, more](#)

By Pierre LeBrun – January 15, 2026

A relieved Gerard Gallant is back in his native Prince Edward Island after a stressful exit from Russia.

First and foremost, Gallant stressed on Wednesday how good his KHL team, the Shanghai Dragons, were to him as he dealt with an illness and made the decision after consultation with team doctors there to step down as coach and return home.

But after eight days in a hospital in Russia, and not feeling right for almost a month, Gallant is in a better place now.

“Since I’ve been home the last 48 hours here, I feel great — like, I feel real good,” the former Jack Adams Award winner told *The Athletic* over the phone Wednesday.

Gallant, 62, saw his P.E.I. doctor on Tuesday, and they will run more tests on him in the coming week or two.

“Hopefully I’m moving in the right direction, because I feel good,” he said. “I’m taking the medication I was prescribed in Russia. My blood pressure got a little high, and I’d never got that before.”

Gallant started feeling ill about a month ago. The stress of coaching and a season not going as hoped, with his KHL team out of playoff position, could have contributed.

“I’ve never been sick before,” Gallant said. “But since I’ve been home, I feel great. My appetite is back, and I feel really good.”

Gallant has a 369-262-4-70 record in 705 NHL games behind the bench, winning the Jack Adams with the Vegas Golden Knights in 2017-18. He was also a finalist for the award in 2021-22 with the New York Rangers and runner-up in 2015-16 with the Florida Panthers.

He last coached in the NHL with the Rangers in 2022-23, when they went 47-22-13 but lost in the first round of the playoffs. He hasn’t given up hope of getting one more NHL opportunity. But in the moment, he’s just relieved to be home.

### **Grubauer’s turnaround**

One of the great stories of this season has been veteran goalie Philipp Grubauer’s reemergence.

Last Jan. 29, the Seattle Kraken placed Grubauer on waivers. Sporting an ugly .866 save percentage in 21 games with a \$5.9 million cap hit through 2026-27, he went unclaimed and was demoted to the AHL.

He started this season as the backup to Joey D’Accord, who himself was a wonderful story last season. Grubauer started just once in October and three times in November. But he’s gotten busier, starting nine times since Dec. 8 — and for good reason.

Through Tuesday, he had 10 goals saved above expected (via MoneyPuck) in 16 games in 2025-26 and was tied for the NHL lead with a .924 save percentage.

“It’s all on the player,” Kraken general manager Jason Botterill told *The Athletic*. “Philipp really stepped up. He trained very hard this summer. He came back to Seattle prepared, and it showed. He utilized our new goalie coach as a resource. Even when he didn’t get many starts at the beginning of the season, he stayed focused and was an excellent teammate.”

By any measure, it’s quite a turnaround.

“Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he took control and forced the situation into one where he could prove he can play instead of simply trying to survive,” Grubauer’s agent, Allain Roy, said. “That’s always a fine line for all athletes because opportunity is often limited by forces outside of themselves.”

The timing couldn’t be more perfect for Grubauer, who is Milan-bound as part of Germany’s Olympic roster.

### **Habs cash in on Texier gamble**

Alexandre Texier’s two-year extension, announced Wednesday, is quite the exclamation point on a flyer by the Montreal Canadiens less than two months ago.

After having his contract terminated by the Blues and becoming a free agent, Texier signed a one-year, \$1 million deal with the Habs on Nov. 23 — out of necessity for the team because of a rash of injuries. The idea for Montreal was that it might flip him at the March 6 deadline if it got healthy and no longer needed his services.

Instead, Texier has seven goals and 16 points in 25 games with the Canadiens — recently playing on the top line — forcing them to re-examine his worth.

At \$2.5 million per year on the new deal, it’s hardly a risk financially. If his game goes south at some point during that deal, Montreal can afford to bury the contract in the AHL if need be.

I believe there was debate within the front office over whether to go two years or three on the extension. In the end, the Habs went two, mitigating risk with a shorter term.

I also think the Canadiens know that Texier feels comfortable in whatever role he ends up in, even if life is great right now on the top line.

### **Could Hamilton trade happen before Olympics?**

Dougie Hamilton surprisingly re-entered the New Jersey Devils lineup after one game as a scratch, but that doesn’t change where his situation is likely headed. All parties involved are still focused on finding a trade resolution.

Hamilton has two more years on his deal at a \$9 million cap hit. There’s hope of getting a trade done before the Feb. 4 Olympics trade freeze, but there’s certainly no guarantee of that, given the contract involved.

The Carolina Hurricanes and Toronto Maple Leafs are among the potential fits. Hamilton was a productive player with the Hurricanes, and there is some level of interest there. And Leafs GM Brad Treliving had Hamilton in Calgary. Granted, he traded him away, but the Leafs have a right-shot, top-four need with the Chris Tanev injury.

It’s believed the Maple Leafs wouldn’t entertain a deal, though, unless the Devils retained significantly. Obviously, there are other teams interested as well. The calls started to come in after the Saturday

healthy scratch and statements from agent J.P. Barry and GM Tom Fitzgerald to *The Athletic* made headlines.

But before any Hamilton trade happens, the Devils are focused on creating cap flexibility. Moving Ondrej Palat and his \$6 million cap hit (through next season) is top of the list, but the veteran winger has a modified no-trade (10-team “yes” list), so it’s also complicated.

The bottom line is, there are a lot of moving parts in New Jersey right now.

### **Bergevin’s decision to join Kekäläinen**

It was intriguing to see former Habs GM Marc Bergevin leave a decent gig in Los Angeles, where he had a good relationship with Kings GM Ken Holland, to join Jarmo Kekäläinen in the Buffalo Sabres front office as associate GM last month. It felt like a parallel move, but he’s landed with a more meaningful role in Buffalo.

Bergevin and Kekäläinen have been close for years — spotted routinely together at GM meetings. So it wasn’t surprising. But it still meant leaving one good gig for another.

“I was in L.A. for four years as an adviser to (former Kings GM Rob Blake) and then Kenny, and there was no issue whatsoever there. Kenny understood,” Bergevin told *The Athletic*. “But when Jarmo reached out, we’ve always had a good relationship over the years, so when he asked me to join, I just felt Buffalo was an appealing place. They have some really good pieces. For whatever reason, they haven’t been able to take the next step. So that’s for me appealing, knowing they have a good base.”

Kekalainen plans to lean heavily on Bergevin. It’s a real senior 1-2 punch at the top for Buffalo now. And two guys who complete each other.

“Jarmo and I have different skill sets. We see things differently,” Bergevin said. “That’s one of the reasons he brought me here.”

That doesn’t mean Bergevin has closed the door on wanting to be a GM again. His deal with the Sabres has an opt-out if that opportunity materializes.

Bergevin was runner-up to Mathieu Darche for the New York Islanders GM job in May and also interviewed for the GM jobs in Toronto (went to Treliving) and Pittsburgh (went to Kyle Dubas) in the summer of 2023.

But for now, it’s all hands on deck with the Sabres. Bergevin moved to Dallas last summer and will remain there. It gives the Sabres a different set of eyes in another part of the league. But he will be busy, traveling around the league.

Bergevin was Montreal’s GM for nearly 10 years, and Kekalainen was Columbus’ for more than 11. After hiring three rookie GMs in a row during his time as Sabres owner, Terry Pegula has obviously seen the value in front-office experience this time around.

### **Bowness signs on for rest of season**

Partly because it came together so quickly, the Blue Jackets signed new coach Rick Bowness just for the rest of the season at this point, GM Don Waddell confirmed.

Both sides will revisit things after the season to see how the fit was. There was mutual agreement to handle it that way. Bowness, who turns 71 on Jan. 25, will want to see where he’s at with the stress of

NHL coaching now back in his life after he retired two years ago. He said Tuesday at his introductory news conference that the main reason he stepped down two years ago in Winnipeg was health reasons, not just his own but also his wife Judy's. Both are doing better now, and he couldn't resist the opportunity when the Jackets reached out Monday.

The Jackets still will be paying fired coach Dean Evason through next season. He had an option in his deal for 2027-28, but that part is voided now.

### **More coaching carousel**

The Jackets' coaching change was the first of the NHL season. After a couple of years of massive turnover, there was at least a half-season of stability for once.

Nashville held off on a coaching change earlier this season when people wondered about Andrew Brunette's future, but GM Barry Trotz stood by him through the worst of it, and the Preds' season has stabilized.

And it got hot in Toronto just before Christmas in terms of market noise, but the Maple Leafs also held firm, with Treiving backing coach Craig Berube at a Dec. 23 news conference. The Leafs, coincidence or not, have since taken off, going 8-1-1 to get back in the playoff race.

The hot spots now would be in New Jersey and Los Angeles. Fitzgerald told local media Wednesday that he's "in lockstep" with Devils coach Sheldon Keefe. As for Kings head coach Jim Hiller, my understanding is that GM Ken Holland isn't planning to make a change as of now. The Kings were a point out of the playoffs as of Wednesday morning. As long as they stay in the race, I think Hiller makes it through the season before things get re-evaluated. Having said that, I can't predict how management would react if the Kings went into a long losing streak.

Firing the coach isn't always the answer. The allure for GMs is that the coaching-change bump has been real often in the past. In the case of Columbus, Waddell thought hard about it for a few weeks before pulling the trigger. No doubt that came after conversations with his leadership core of players, too.

And the timing of it was key: The Jackets made the change before a critical 12-game stretch ahead of the Olympic break (eight games at home). Waddell feels his team, which missed the playoffs by two points last season, could still get back in the race. So he's hoping to get the Bowness Bounce. So far, so good with an opening win over Calgary.