



## **Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips**

### **October 28-29, 2025**

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## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Miles Wood doesn't miss a beat in return from injury

**By Aaron Portzline – October 28, 2025**

Two weeks ago, Miles Wood was afraid his career might be in peril. A scary eye injury in the Columbus Blue Jackets' home opener knocked him out of the lineup for two weeks as he waited for the blood to drain so the full range of vision could return.

Wood didn't miss anything on Tuesday.

The Blue Jackets' veteran winger celebrated his return to the lineup with his best game in nearly three years. Wood scored the tying goal at the 13:55 mark in the third period, then scored the overtime game-winner at 2:53 to send Columbus to a 4-3 win over the Buffalo Sabres before 15,059 at KeyBank Center.

It was the first OT game-winner of Wood's 517-game NHL career, and Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said he played himself into the role with a strong performance in regulation.

"He was having a good night, right?" Evason told FanDuel Sports Network. "And that's what we do when we huddle after the game's over as a coaching staff, we talk about stuff like that. We have a card (we carry) that projects who we think should go. And then somebody says, 'Maybe Woody.'

"That's part of coaching. Sometimes you guess right, and sometimes you don't. Fortunately, we guessed right tonight."

Zach Werenski and Yegor Chinakhov also scored for the Blue Jackets, who came back from 2-1 and 3-2 deficits. Werenski's power-play goal with just 15.4 seconds remaining in the second allowed the Jackets to escape a shoddy period in a 2-2 tie.

Goaltender Jet Greaves finished with 35 saves, and the Blue Jackets won their fourth consecutive road game for the first time since Jan. 30 to Feb. 12, 2022. They didn't win their fourth game on the road last season until Dec. 8.

The Blue Jackets ended the game with a slick series of plays beginning with center Isac Lundestrom, who appeared to be headed out of the attack to get a reset at three-on-three play, only to turn a tight circle at the blue line. That opened up the zone for Werenski to creep in through the left circle.

Lundestrom found Werenski in stride, and Werenski was preparing to shoot. But he saw Wood on the doorstep and set him up perfectly.

"It's the best feeling in team sports," Wood said. "Lundy made a great play to (Werenski), and I was just fortunate enough to get there and make a play."

Evason's decision-making has been questioned by more than a few in the fan base regarding his handling of winger Chinakhov, who has been stuck in a fourth-line role since he came into the lineup when Wood was injured on Oct. 13.

The coach had a tough call after practice on Monday, when it was clear that Wood was ready to return. Instead of scratching Chinakhov, who has played very well over the last week, he bumped Zach Aston-Reese from the lineup to put Wood and Chinakhov on the flanks of Lundestrom, the center.

That's the Blue Jackets' fourth line, but it produced like a top line on Tuesday.

Chinakhov scored the game's first goal off a strong forechecking effort with Wood. When Buffalo's clear attempt brushed off a leg and shot to the center of the Sabres defensive zone, Chinakhov pounced, skating wide of goaltender Alex Lyon before making it 1-0 at 6:09.

It was Chinakhov's second goal in as many games, and he played a season-high 12:49. Wood could have easily been credited with an assist on the play.

The two teamed up again on the tying goal late in the third.

Chinakhov gained the zone with the puck, and waited — and waited — just inside the blue line for traffic to form in front of the Sabres net. It was Wood coming through the left side of the zone, and Chinakhov fired at the net just as he crossed Lyon.

"Chinny made a great play there," said Wood, who was acquired in a trade last June with the Colorado Avalanche. "You know, I didn't really know him prior to this year, but over the last five or six games, while I've been in the stands (with the eye injury), he's stuck out to me.

"He's an incredible talent. Incredible kid. And he made a great play there. I just happened to get a stick on it and it goes in."

Wood (two goals, zero assists and two points) and Lundestrom (zero goals, one assist and one point) were both plus-3, while Chinakhov was plus-2.

The Blue Jackets didn't have much time to celebrate their second straight win beyond regulation. On Saturday in Pittsburgh, the Jackets beat the Penguins 5-4 in a shootout after coughing up a 4-2 lead late in the game.

"This wasn't the prettiest of wins," Werenski said. "The second and third period, we kind of opened ourselves up a bit. We got away from the kind of game we want to play. But we found a way to get two points."

Because of the way the Wood-Lundestrom-Chinakhov line played, Evason and his assistants were able to roll four forward lines and give them mostly even ice time. Wood played 13:24, Lundestrom 13:48 and Chinakhov 12:49.

There was a relatively small gap between them and the top line: center Sean Monahan (16:05), with wingers Dmitri Voronkov ( 13:59) and Kirill Marchenko (15:52).

That's key because the Blue Jackets host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday in Nationwide Arena, their second back-to-back of the season.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets may not be road warriors just yet, but they're finally winning away games

By Aaron Portzline – October 28, 2025

There was a point last season when coach Dean Evason stepped before his players to talk about their struggles away from Nationwide Arena. Winning on the road is difficult in the NHL, but the Columbus Blue Jackets, Evason felt, were making it harder than it needed to be.

Was it the 0-5-2 stumble in late November and early December? Or the separate 1-6-1 plummet in December? Evason couldn't remember, but it was a story worth retelling.

"I tried to explain ... that the road should not be a hard place to play anymore, right?" Evason said on Monday, as the Blue Jackets prepared to play in Buffalo on Tuesday night. "Back in the day, we went into the Spectrum (to play the Philadelphia Flyers). Now, that was hard."

The Flyers were infamously surly and violent. Their fans weren't much better, and they were allowed to drink. The Spectrum, which was torn down in 2010, was one of a few NHL rinks during Evason's playing days where the fans could be less welcoming than the players.

Evason was trying to stress that today's NHL rinks are nothing like that. Very rarely are there fights in the stands, beers dumped over the glass or worse. Some arenas are more engaged than others, but most are pretty family-friendly.

The message — "toughen up!" — was delivered. But the details may have missed the point.

"The (assistant) coaches said, 'Dean, they don't know what Spectrum is,'" Evason said. "'They think it's a cable company.'"

That story may explain part of the reason the Blue Jackets struggled so profoundly on the road last season, but also across the previous four seasons. When a club undergoes a massive roster rebuild, it loads up on young, promising players who have hard lessons to learn in the NHL.

During the past five seasons, the Blue Jackets have gone 56-112-24 (.354) in road games. Only the Chicago Blackhawks (54-119-19, .331) have been worse.

That's why the Blue Jackets' start to this season, in that respect, has been such a pleasant surprise. The Jackets have been better on the road (3-1-0) than they've been in Nationwide.

Let's all say it together: *small sample*. But the three road wins have been impressive.

On Oct. 11, the Jackets allowed four power-play goals but still beat the Minnesota Wild 7-4 in the Wild's home opener. On Oct. 21, the Blue Jackets played maybe their most complete game of the season in a 5-1 win over the Dallas Stars.

Then, on Saturday, the Blue Jackets overcame 1-0 and 2-1 deficits, then coughed up a late two-goal lead, only to snatch a win from the Pittsburgh Penguins 5-4 in a shootout. It's only the sixth time Columbus has won a regular-season game in Pittsburgh.

"We've talked about (winning on the road) enough, and you can talk until you're blue in the face," Evason said after Saturday's game. "They get it. They understand it. They know it. We've talked a lot about our leadership, our preparation of the players ... it was really good tonight."

When Adam Fantilli (21 years old), Kent Johnson (23) and Kirill Marchenko (25) first started playing for the Blue Jackets, coaches felt the need to protect them on the road, to make sure — as much as possible — that they weren't exposed by unfair matchups. It was the same for Dmitri Voronkov (25).

On Saturday, though, Voronkov scored two goals against the Penguins. Johnson, Fantilli and Marchenko were the first three players Evason called on for the shootout, and all three scored.

"It gives you a ton of confidence," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "Columbus hasn't had a lot of success in Pittsburgh, and Dallas ... that's a tough place to play and a really good team. When you win games like that, you start to get confidence that your group can grind it out on the road."

The young impact players gaining experience and maturity isn't the only reason for optimism, though.

When NHL clubs play on the road, they have to put their five skaters on the ice first after a stoppage, allowing the home team to get the matchups they want. Evason has tried to balance the Blue Jackets' top three lines — skill, size, defensive awareness — so his club isn't so vulnerable.

That hasn't always been possible, but the Blue Jackets are as deep at center as they've ever been, with Sean Monahan, Fantilli and Charlie Coyle the top three centers. After years of struggles in face-offs, the Blue Jackets (51.5 percent, 10th in the league) now start with the puck more often than not.

Evason said he doesn't change anything from the bench when the Blue Jackets are on the road, and he wants his club to play the same way they do at home. Fantilli said nothing changes for him, as far as preparation and playing style, but others admitted to adapting.

"The key (for me) is keeping it super simple, making the other team make mistakes," Werenski said. "I'm still trying to make plays, obviously, but I find when we play our simplest games and we're just directing it north, and we're above guys defensively, it can be frustrating for the home team."

The Blue Jackets have had a winning record on the road only seven times in their first 24 seasons. It won't surprise you that in five of those seven seasons, they made the playoffs, including each year during their four-season string of postseason berths from 2016-17 to 2019-20.

Last season, the Jackets went 14-23-4 away from Nationwide. Once the 0-5-2 and 1-6-1 nosedives passed, the Blue Jackets played close to .500 on the road. They went 10-11-1 from Jan. 7 to the end of the season, starting with a win in Pittsburgh that ended a 15-game losing streak in the Steel City.

The more success the Blue Jackets experience on the road, the more the mystique and experience of some of their opponents begin to fade.

The Penguins were celebrating four of their Hall of Fame players on Saturday, so the game had extra meaning for Pittsburgh and its fans. The Blue Jackets skated off to celebrate in their dressing room amid a mostly quiet PPG Paints Arena.

They hope for the same feeling tonight in upstate New York.

"When you leave a building and it's dead quiet ... Yeah, it's a satisfying feeling for a team," Evason said.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Miles Wood's goals a sight to behold in Columbus Blue Jackets' OT win: takeaways

By Brian Hedger – October 28, 2025

Two weeks ago, Miles Wood grabbed his left eye and worried that he'd lost vision in it permanently.

A stick blade clipped him during the first period of the Blue Jackets' 3-2 loss Oct. 13 at Nationwide Arena and he dropped to the ice in a near panic. Later, he called it the scariest injury he's ever had playing hockey, worse than having eight teeth knocked out during his first three NHL seasons.

"I said to the trainers, 'Break whatever bone you want, just don't take my eye,'" Wood said 10 days after it happened. "When I was down on the ice, I thought my eyeball was in my hand when I pulled it away. I couldn't see for a half hour after, so, yeah, I was kind of scared, but all good now."

How good?

Well, Wood returned to the Blue Jackets' lineup Oct. 28 in Buffalo, his hometown, and keyed a 4-3 overtime win with two late goals to down the Sabres. After tying it 3-3 with 6:05 left in regulation, Wood won it at 2:53 of OT after toting a bouncing puck into the Buffalo zone, chopping a pass to Isac Lundestrom and heading to the net.

Zach Werenski's pass deflected off Wood's stick for a deflection under the crossbar to give the Blue Jackets (5-4-0) their fourth straight road win. They're 4-1-0 in road games.

"It's a true team environment, which I love," Wood said on the FanDuel Sports Network postgame broadcast. "Guys care for each other, and that clearly showed tonight."

Here are three takeaways:

### **Yegor Chinkahov is showing why the Columbus Blue Jackets are being selective with trade options**

Nothing has changed from Yegor Chinakhov's perspective.

His desire is for a fresh start via trade, which is likely the primary reason that recent scouting interest has skyrocketed at Nationwide Arena. Chinakhov has a rare combination of size, speed, skill and shooting acumen, and players like him usually play top-six roles. The Blue Jackets already have their top nine, so Chinakhov's options are limited.

Asked for an update on FanDuel Sports Network, Waddell said nothing has changed and he's not willing to trade Chinakhov for less worth to his NHL roster.

"We're just going to keep monitoring it," Waddell said. "Right now, he's a Blue Jacket. As long as he's a Blue Jacket, we're going to get the most out of him."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets struggling to score while dominating shifts**

Statistically, the Blue Jackets have become one of the NHL's best at 5-on-5 and even strength. They're capable of dominating possession, racking up shots and generating scoring chances, which are all hallmarks of playoff teams.

The biggest issue for the Blue Jackets during dominant shifts is simply not beating enough goalies. Yegor Chinakhov's goal gave the Blue Jackets an early 1-0 lead, but they weren't able to increase it before the first period ended with the same score.

It's a great sign for the Blue Jackets to dominate multiple shifts and periods, but not scoring enough goals leaves them more susceptible to losing games they should win.

**Columbus Blue Jackets scratch Erik Gudbranson with hip soreness**

Following warmups, the Blue Jackets scratched defenseman Erik Gudbranson unexpectedly. He felt hip soreness, which led to him sitting out. Jake Christiansen, who'd watched the previous two games as a scratch, replaced Gudbranson on the third pairing.

According to Natural Stat Trick, Christiansen and Dante Fabbro posted the best secondary stats among all defensemen in 9:42 together. During those shifts, the Blue Jackets generated 66.7% of attempts (16-8), 60% of shots (6-4) and 100% of scoring chances (5-0).

## The Columbus Dispatch / Miles Wood's two goals lead Columbus Blue Jackets to 4-3 overtime win over Buffalo Sabres

**By Brian Hedger – October 28, 2025**

A great start and strong finish that included two late goals from Miles Wood earned the Blue Jackets a thrilling 4-3 overtime victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Oct. 28 at KeyBank Center.

After coughing up a 1-0 lead and falling behind by scores of 2-1 in the second and 3-2 in the third, Wood's goals late in the third and 2:53 into overtime made his first game back from a scary eye injury memorable in the fourth straight road win for the Blue Jackets (5-4-0).

According to the NHL, Wood became the second player in Blue Jackets history to send a game to overtime with a tying goal in the third period and also score the OT winner. The other was David Vyborny, who pulled it off twice (Jan. 14, 2006 and March 7, 2007).

Jet Greaves (35 saves) made a great stop on a breakaway in OT by Jiri Kulich, stopping the lone overtime shot for the Sabres (4-4-2). Alex Lyons made 34 saves for Buffalo. The win gives the Blue Jackets a 4-1-0 record in their first five road games plus a victory to start their second straight back-to-back set, which concludes Oct. 29 against the Toronto Maple Leafs at Nationwide Arena.

Yegor Chinakhov and Zach Werenski scored the other goals for Columbus, including Werenski tying it 2-2 on a power play with 16 seconds left in the second.

Josh Doan, Ryan McLeod and former Blue Jackets forward Josh Dunne scored for the Sabres, who overcame an early 1-0 deficit after Chinakhov's goal 6:09 into the game. Chinakhov scored a goal for the second straight game and assisted on Wood's first goal for a two-point night.

Columbus dominated the first period but only led 1-0 at the first intermission after outshooting the Sabres 14-9 and controlling play for most of the 20 minutes. The Jackets' inability to score more than once in that period kept the Sabres close and allowed them to take control of the game in the second.

Doan and McLeod scored 2:33 apart in the middle period to give Buffalo a 2-1 lead. After Werenski's tying goal to close the second, Dunne opened the third with his first NHL goal to Buffalo a 3-2 lead over his former team. That's when the Blue Jackets' fourth line of Wood, Chinakhov and Isac Lundestrom rose to the occasion.

After Wood's first goal as a Blue Jacket tied it 3-3 with 6:05 left in regulation, tipping a shot from Chinakhov past Lyons, the speedy right wing ended it in OT by deflecting Werenski's pass to the front of the net over Lyons and under the crossbar.



## The Hockey Writers / Miles Wood Nets Overtime Winner as Blue Jackets Slip Past the Sabres

**By Jean Patrick Vidad – October 28, 2025**

Miles Wood sent the game into overtime with a tip-in before tapping the puck over goalie Alex Lyon en route to a Columbus Blue Jackets overtime victory against the Buffalo Sabres.

The Blue Jackets earned their fourth straight win in hostile territory, while the Sabres dropped their second overtime loss in two consecutive games, snapping their four-game winning streak at home.

### **Game Recap**

The Blue Jackets set the tone of the game, applying constant pressure on the Sabres' blue line and maintaining stable puck possession. The first shot on goal came from Kirill Marchenko's backhand, which almost went in had Lyon not made an impeccable save. Connor Timmins' body was turned when Marchenko, hence, was a non-factor in that play.

Boone Jenner then jumped on a 4-on-2 opportunity and fired a shot off the middle of the slot, which Lyon denied. Columbus launched another one from a faceoff, but was caught by Lyon. As they say, persistence pays off. Yegor Chinakhov overcame a 3-on-1 possession battle on the wall to win the puck and patiently tucked it to dump into the net for a 1-0 lead.

Timmins made an almost costly mistake again after slipping on the rush, yet Buffalo managed to thwart a two-on-two chance. The Sabres tried to respond, with captain Rasmus Dahlin slapping a one-timer from the top of the right faceoff circle, which the goalie caught. Alternate captain Tage Thompson, on the other hand, willed the puck to the front of the net to flick a backhand, but Jet Greaves stopped the shot.

Buffalo earned their first power-play opportunity after crashing into the net, trying to tap the puck past the goal line. The Sabres were sloppy, however, on the man advantage, as the Blue Jackets cleared three possessions. Columbus was also active in stifling Buffalo's shot attempts, which led to a turnover from the power play. The Sabres' only shot on the power play came from a last-ditch shot from up high.

The Sabres made up for their first-period woes, peppering shots from all cylinders. Thompson let one go from a breakaway opportunity while Noah Ostlund discharged a shot. Dahlin also sent one to the goal, but Buffalo didn't have bodies in front of the net to make a play with the puck. Bowen Byram hustled on defense to deliver a body check on an odd-man rush, which prevented the goal while wristing a shot from the middle of the left faceoff circle from Peyton Krebs' feed.

Timmins redeemed himself after a couple of first-period errors, winning the puck in a battle at the boards, sending it to Josh Doan, who grabbed a rebound from his own shot, and burying it the second time around to tie the game at 1-1. Ryan McLeod followed with the second goal after playing a give-and-go with Byram, who sniped a shot that hit Damon Severson on the leg to get past the goal line.

The referees received backlash from the home crowd after calling a power play on an Alex Tuch penalty for going after the puck while Timmins was harassed on the defensive end. The Blue Jackets found their equalizer as Zach Werenski slung a goal from the top of the slot. A scrum at the end of the period awarded Buffalo with a power play to start the third period.

Beck Malenstyn gained possession from a forecheck and pushed the puck to Josh Dunne, nabbing his first goal of the season and putting the Sabres ahead again, 3-2. Lyon stonewalled three consecutive

shots from Columbus and saved a shot from Jenner from the middle of the slot. Buffalo retaliated as Thompson blasted a shot from the middle of the slot, but Greaves balked at his attempt. Wood scored the game-tying goal from Chinakhov's saucer pass to extend the game into overtime.

In overtime, Jiri Kulich rushed on a breakaway after Tuch flipped the puck into open ice, but Greaves successfully seized the shot. On their odd-man rush, Wood saw an opening on Lyon's guard and put the puck into the top right corner of the goal to allow Columbus to escape with a 4-3 win.

## The Hockey Writers / Yegor Chinakhov Is Becoming Irreplaceable for the Blue Jackets

**By Wesley Minke – October 27, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets have recently been playing a faster and more physical brand of hockey, which head coach Dean Evason is known to install. However one of the best Blue Jackets as of late has been a player not known for that style of play. Yegor Chinakhov, and his wicked wrist shot, have been the center of attention for a Blue Jackets offense that has been thriving as of late.

Chinakhov was a healthy scratch to begin the season after a long offseason of rumors and question marks surrounding his tenure with the Blue Jackets. He formally requested a trade in mid-July through his agent Shumi Babaev, and Blue Jackets management began working toward a solution for both sides. With his recent play, however, the Blue Jackets are exposing Chinakhov's rising value and winning both sides of the debate.

Watching Chinakhov play some of his best hockey of his young career, you can't help but see the argument for keeping him and wanting to see what the Blue Jackets' young core is capable of achieving before breaking them apart. Chinakhov could be a big piece of that puzzle.

His development from being a questionable pick at the end of the first round in the 2020 NHL Entry Draft, into what now seems to be one of the top pieces for contenders to try and add, shows the potential he has. He has deficiencies on the defensive side of the puck, but some of the top offensive players in the world have that same problem. If his superb offensive ability can carry this Blue Jackets team anywhere, you would be hard-pressed to see him traded anywhere.

Currently Chinakhov carries a moderately-low salary number that does not hurting the Blue Jackets much at all, but his offensive upside has been a spark in games and got the team going. His first goal of the season came Saturday night in Pittsburgh against the Penguins to give the Blue Jackets a 3-2 lead early in the third period, in a game they would go on to win in a shootout.

However, that was not the only display of offensive brilliance Chinakhov has shown this season. He has been one of the main reasons the Blue Jackets are currently third in the league in expected goals per 60 minutes.

With the obvious production, the Blue Jackets have a reason to want to make this work with one of their homegrown players in terms of draft capital. Dealing Chinakhov would not likely return the type of talent that would allow the Blue Jackets to compete this season, and likely wouldn't return the type of player to fill any sort of need currently either.

Evason will keep letting his offensively-minded players play, and this mentality of not putting a leash on these players or trying to restrain them by playing in the confines of a system that doesn't fit their game, is one of the separating factors between Evason and the previous coaches in recent Blue Jackets history.

### **What Must Chinakhov do Moving Forward?**

The biggest thing Chinakhov needs to do to maintain his spot within a talented group of forwards is to keep playing his style of hockey. He can not let the flow of the game dictate how he attacks a team. The thing that makes him so dangerous is his ability to create from out of nowhere, and I believe that is exactly what the Blue Jackets lack without him.

He is not asked to be a facilitator, but putting him on a forward line with Zach Aston-Reese and Isac Lundeström gives him enough room to play a risky offensive style knowing he has two willing defenders to support him on his forward pairing.

The lines the Blue Jackets deployed against the Penguins were some of the most complete and efficient they have had this season. It gave the Blue Jackets a great chance to win, and the team did just that.

Moreover, I thought the report card from the game showed exactly how balanced the Blue Jackets' attack was and how impactful Chinakhov's individual offensive game was. He played one of his best games, and is going to be a guy moving forward that will likely get special teams work added onto his responsibilities because of his unique and difficult shot.

Be on the lookout Chinakhov's offensive firepower to lead Columbus — this might just be the start to one of the Blue Jackets' budding stars finding his footing on a team that might blow expectations out of the water this season.

## NHL.com / Blue Jackets determined to take next step with playoff berth, GM says

**By Mike Zeisberger – October 29, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets didn't want to break up the band.

Not when there was unfinished business to take care of.

For the Blue Jackets, who finished just two points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the final Eastern Conference Wild card last spring, there was a desire from the players to take the next step this season. It was a message management heard loud and clear.

"A lot of people said we should be very happy (getting that close), but these guys weren't satisfied with that," general manager Don Waddell said.

As such, the Blue Jackets lineup will look very familiar when they host the Toronto Maple Leafs (7:30 p.m. ET; FDSNOH, NHLN, SN1, TVAS) at Nationwide Arena on Wednesday in what is the only game on the NHL schedule. According to Waddell, there's a good reason for that.

"They were very disappointed that we didn't make (the postseason)," he said. "So that carried it into the summertime, and that's why I said multiple times, I didn't feel like I needed to make a lot of changes. We wanted to make a few, of course, but didn't need to make a lot because these guys, what they went through last year and how they felt during the year, I knew they'd come back this year ready to roll."

Which is what they did when they arrived in Columbus in September.

"Guys all came back, and training camp had a great vibe," Waddell said. "Guys were here early, and the feeling I had amongst the great leadership on this team, along with our young players, is that these guys aren't going to let it happen again. So I felt good about coming in here, and we've actually probably played better than our record indicates."

To that end, both the Maple Leafs (5-4-1) and Blue Jackets (5-4-0) have started the season flirting with the .500 mark. Toronto defeated the Calgary Flames 4-3 Tuesday while Columbus defeated the Buffalo Sabres 4-3 in overtime.

Waddell said the number of teams in the NHL's so-called mushy middle early can partially be attributed to the parity in the League, a situation that has been enhanced by the escalating salary cap in the coming years. Teams seem to be interested in keeping their own players, especially with the number of quality ones dwindling on the open market.

"As for the lack of player movement around the League, if you go back and look at the transactions this summer, I haven't counted them, but it's by far the least amount of transactions we've had in probably 15 years," Waddell said. "And a lot of it has to do with there not being a lot of top-end free agents on the market, of course, because of the cap going up, and people are finding a way to keep their own players."

"If you go back the last five, six years, every summer there's been three or four teams that had to make moves to get under the cap in the summer. But after free agency started this summer, there wasn't anybody in cap jail that had to make moves. So I just think going forward, free agency is not going to be like it used to be."

That being the case, Waddell said drafting and player development are going to be as important as ever. A prime example is Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko, the No. 49 overall pick in the 2018 NHL Draft

by Columbus who has nine points (five goals, four assists) in nine games heading into the matchup against Toronto.

"He really took a step forward playing both ends of the ice last year," Waddell said of the 25-year-old who had career highs in goals (31), assists (43), points (74) and plus-minus (plus-29) in 79 games in 2024-25. "And when you play both ends, you get more opportunity.

"I'd have to say he's been our catalyst from a goal-scoring standpoint, that's for sure. He has a bright future."

Waddell also offered an update on forward Yegor Chinakhov, who requested a trade in July.

Chinakhov, the No. 21 overall pick in the 2020 NHL Draft, had 15 points (seven goals, eight assists) in 30 games last season and was frustrated that he was often out of the lineup while the Blue Jackets were making their run down the stretch for a Stanley Cup Playoff spot, which came up just short. The 24-year-old, who had a goal and an assist in the Blue Jackets win against the Sabres Tuesday, has primarily played on the fourth line and has four points (two goals, two assists) in six games, averaging 9:44 of ice time.

"First of all, it's not the first player I've ever dealt with who has asked for a trade," Waddell said. "And just because a player wants a trade doesn't mean you have to make a trade.

"I said to him and his agent prior to training camp that for something to happen, it has to make sense for us. I don't need to win any potential deal, but I need to get equal value for what we think we have. If we get that, we'll look at it. If not, come to camp and work your way into the lineup.

"He showed up two weeks before training camp, and he's worked hard the last four or five games he's played. He's doing everything from his end right now that we could ask him to do."

## The Athletic / Where do NHL teams get their best players? What Player Tiers data tells us about team building

**By Shayna Goldman – October 28, 2025**

Every year, the Player Tiers project highlights the top 150 players in the NHL heading into a new season.

While it's not a definitive ranking from 1-150, this project sorts the league's biggest stars into five tiers based on impact: MVP cornerstones, franchise pillars, All-Star candidates, the true stars and elite support. We blend traditional hockey wisdom, data-driven analysis and input from a deep panel of insiders from around the game.

The project teaches us a few things each year: who the league's strongest stars are and which teams are richest, with all 32 teams getting represented at varying levels. The league's best contenders tend to have core players at the top of the hierarchy, with support sprinkled across the lower tiers. The reigning back-to-back champion Florida Panthers appear in this year's 150 ten times, at every level. And that's who the rest of the league has to try to emulate.

But how do teams *get* those top players? That is one more piece of the team-building puzzle the Player Tiers project can shed light on.


























Two days on the hockey calendar generate a ton of attention: the trade deadline and the start of free agency. But despite all of the buzz and excitement these days generate, this isn't when teams do their best building or find their biggest stars.

Teams like the Vegas Golden Knights, Panthers, and Dallas Stars show it's possible to add franchise players through trades. That's how Vegas acquired Jack Eichel (2A) and (technically) Mitch Marner (2B), the Panthers landed Matthew Tkachuk (2A) and Sam Reinhart (2C), and how Mikko Rantanen (2B) made his way to Dallas.

Those deals are a key reason why teams like the Golden Knights and Panthers are so competitive. Vegas is in a unique position as an expansion team that took an aggressive approach from Day 1 rather than building a foundation with a deep prospect pipeline. Florida, on the other hand, has 10 players in the top 150, five of whom were brought in via trade (Tkachuk, Reinhart, Sam Bennett, Seth Jones, and Brad Marchand).

A few teams spotted rising talent and traded for players before they made their NHL debuts, like Adam Fox (2C), Nick Suzuki (3A), Filip Forsberg (3C) and Brock Faber (4B). Others found up-and-coming All-Star talent on the trade market, such as Tage Thompson and Brandon Hagel, who had some experience at this level.

### Top traded players in Tiers

Tier	Team	Player	Position
2A		Matthew Tkachuk	Right Wing
2A		Jack Eichel	Center
2B		Mikko Rantanen	Right Wing
2B		Mitch Marner	Right Wing
2C		Adam Fox*	Defensemen
2C		Sam Reinhart	Right Wing
3A		Nick Suzuki*	Center
3A		Jake Guentzel	Left Wing
3A		Brandon Hagel	Left Wing
3B		Tage Thompson	Center/Right Wing
3C		Filip Forsberg*	Left Wing
3C		Devon Toews	Defensemen
4A		Noah Dobson	Defensemen
4A		Mikhail Sergachev	Defensemen
4A		Mark Stone	Right Wing
4A		MacKenzie Weegar	Defensemen
4B		Brock Faber*	Defensemen
4B		Linus Ullmark	Goaltender
4C		Bo Horvat	Center
4C		J.T. Miller	Center
4C		Martin Necas	Right Wing
4C		Mattias Ekholm	Defensemen
4C		Sam Bennett	Center
4C		Seth Jones	Defensemen
4C		Noah Hanifin	Defensemen

But for most teams, this isn't the strategy for team-building. Just 40 of the top 150 players were traded to their current teams — none of whom fall in Tier 1. Six of those 40 make up the 22 Tier 2 players; in Tier 3, it's five of 31.

Instead, the trade market is the ideal way to complement a roster with Tier 4 and 5 talent. That's what Mikhail Sergachev and Noah Dobson, two star-caliber defenders, have done for their respective teams. The same goes for Martin Necas, Bo Horvat and Linus Ullmark.

This doesn't really project to change anytime soon because there aren't a lot of players in the upper tiers on the market (unless Sidney Crosby changes his long-time stance and demands a way out of Pittsburgh, or another big name shakes things up). Right now, the biggest names who could go on the trade block are Rasmus Andersson, Bryan Rust and Alex Tuch, who are all basically fringe Tier 5ers. With new restrictions on salary cap retention, the trade market could slow even more and lessen the chances of a star player moving in-season.

While traded players make up just one quarter of this year's Top 150, there are even fewer free-agent signings.

Since the Toronto Maple Leafs traded Marner to Vegas before the market opened, Artemi Panarin stands as the lone free-agent signing in the top two tiers. Slide down to Tier 3, and Sergei Bobrovsky joins the list. In Tier 4, the group expands to four: Nikolaj Ehlers, Carter Verhaeghe, Zach Hyman and John Tavares. There are nine others in Tier 5.



### Free agent signings in Tiers

Tier	Team	Player	Position
2C		Artemi Panarin	Left Wing
3C		Sergei Bobrovsky	Goaltender
4A		Nikolaj Ehlers	Winger
4C		Carter Verhaeghe	Left Wing
4C		Zach Hyman	Winger
4C		John Tavares	Center
5A		Dougie Hamilton	Defensemen
5A		Nazem Kadri	Center
5A		Sean Monahan	Center
5A		Anthony Stolarz	Goaltender
5A		Dylan Strome	Center
5B		Vladislav Gavrikov	Defensemen
5C		Vincent Trocheck	Center
5C		Christopher Tanev	Defensemen

It's becoming increasingly true that most high-end players don't make it to July 1. Instead, free agency is generally just a way to bolster a supporting cast.

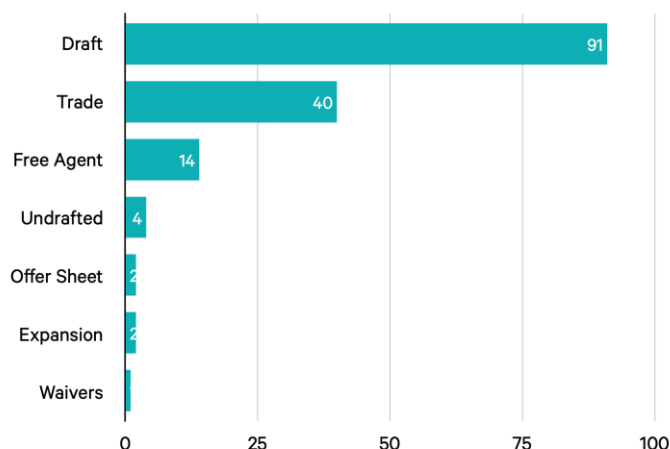
Just look at the 2025 class. Rantanen and Crosby both extended early. So did Leon Draisaitl, Travis Konency, Victor Hedman, Shea Theodore, Jaccob Slavin, Igor Shesterkin and Jake Oettinger, among others.

As star-studded as the 2026 class once looked, it's already dwindling. Connor McDavid, Kirill Kaprizov, Kyle Connor and Eichel extended early. So did Jake Walman, Thatcher Demko and Anthony Stolarz. Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky are the only two members of the 2026 free agent class in the top three tiers; below that, the list includes a couple of scorers (Adrian Kempe and Necas), along with others on the downswings of their careers (John Carlson, Alex Ovechkin and Ryan McDonagh). As much as general managers could have hoped to use their expanded cap space next July, the talent may not be there for it.

That's why teams can't operate on the assumption that players like Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes, Nikita Kucherov and Nico Hischier will actually be available when their contracts expire in 2027, either.

So, while there can be oddities — like Gustav Forsling on waivers, gems added through expansion (Theodore and Vince Dunn) and the Offer Sheet Boys in Tier 5 — those are supplemental ways to add to a roster. While teams like the Panthers and Golden Knights have leaned on free agency and the trade market more than most, that isn't a blueprint every team can follow, either.

### Player Tiers Top-150



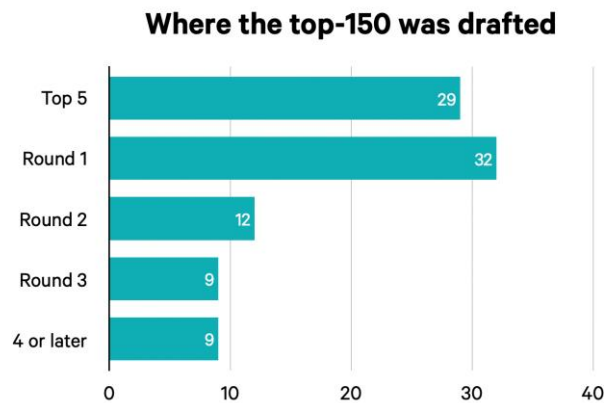
Instead, the Player Tiers project emphasizes the importance of drafting, developing and retaining star players.

That's especially true at the top of the hierarchy. The best way to acquire MVP-caliber talent in the NHL is through the draft, as all 10 members of Tier 1 were picked by their current clubs. Eight of those 10 players were selected in Round 1; six (McDavid, Draisaitl, Makar, Nathan MacKinnon, Auston Matthews and Barkov) were top-five picks. Kucherov, who was drafted 58th, is a reminder there can be gems outside of Round 1; Kaprizov drives that point home even more as a fifth-rounder.

### Top draft picks in Tiers

Tier	Team	Player	Draft Round	Overall Pick
1A		Connor McDavid	1*	1
1A		Leon Draisaitl	1*	3
1A		Nathan MacKinnon	1*	1
1A		Cale Makar	1*	4
1B		Quinn Hughes	1	7
1B		Nikita Kucherov	2	58
1B		Aleksander Barkov	1*	2
1B		Auston Matthews	1*	1
1C		David Pastrnak	1	25
1C		Kirill Kaprizov	5	135
2A		Connor Hellebuyck	5	130
2A		Sidney Crosby	1*	1
2A		Rasmus Dahlin	1*	1
2A		Miro Heiskanen	1*	3
2A		Jack Hughes	1*	1
2B		Zach Werenski	1	8
2B		Brayden Point	3	79
2B		Igor Shesterkin	4	118
2C		Evan Bouchard	1	10
2C		Josh Morrissey	1	13
2C		William Nylander	1	8
2C		Andrei Vasilevskiy	1	19
2C		Sebastian Aho	2	35
2C		Jacob Slavin	4	120
2C		Nico Hischier	1*	1

Fifteen of the 22 players in Tier 2 were drafted — 10 in the first round (five in the top five), one in the second, one in the third and one in Round 5. Tier 3 is also primarily composed of drafted players — 17 first-rounders (seven in the top-five), three second-rounders and two picks selected later than that.



Across five tiers, it adds up to 91 players in total — 29 selected in the top five, with another 32 later first-rounders.

The value of those first-round picks should be eye-catching to teams outside of the contenders' circle. While teams in their most competitive windows can afford to trade picks for players who will solidify their Stanley Cup chances, others shouldn't just be throwing away one of their best chances of bringing in a potential star player.

Then there's the developmental factor. While players picked early are expected to have higher ceilings (which can be reached sooner), it's not a perfect science, either. Top picks can fail and later-round picks can emerge as difference-makers. But investing in that process can be the difference between having a game-breaker versus a secondary player.

And after years of helping a player reach their ceiling, there's the retention element of it all that has come to the forefront again with some recent contract trends.

Kirill Kaprizov and Kyle Connor were both paid above their market values. And while it's easy to compare that to the fact both Eichel and McDavid signed at discounts, it makes sense why these teams paid up.

Kaprizov is just one of 10 MVP-caliber players. If the Wild were to lose him, this team would have to draft, develop and retain someone else to fill that void. But the chances of that happening are slim considering how few players are truly at his level.

In Connor's case, a 3B player is a lot different from Kaprizov in 1C. Still, only nine of 31 Tier 3-caliber players weren't drafted by their current clubs. So, as easy as it is to point out the fact that Rantanen and Marner are a full tier ahead and were both acquired via trade, the context of the available talent pool and the fact Connor is the Jets' highest-ranked forward helps justify that \$12 million AAV.

When teams move on from those highly drafted players, they often still shine elsewhere. There are 55 players in this year's Tiers who were drafted by a different team than they are currently on; nine of them went in the top five (from Reinhart and Marner in Tier 2 down to John Tavares and Seth Jones in Tier 4). Another 23 were selected later in Round 1; that list includes Tkachuk and Rantanen, along with Ehlers, Necas and Dobson.

The Panthers show a team's draft history doesn't necessarily have to define their future — as long as they can get creative elsewhere. And while that's a lesson for the rest of the league to study, Player

Tiers still points to the draft as the best way to construct a roster. That's what every rising team should keep in mind as they try to become the next contender to beat.